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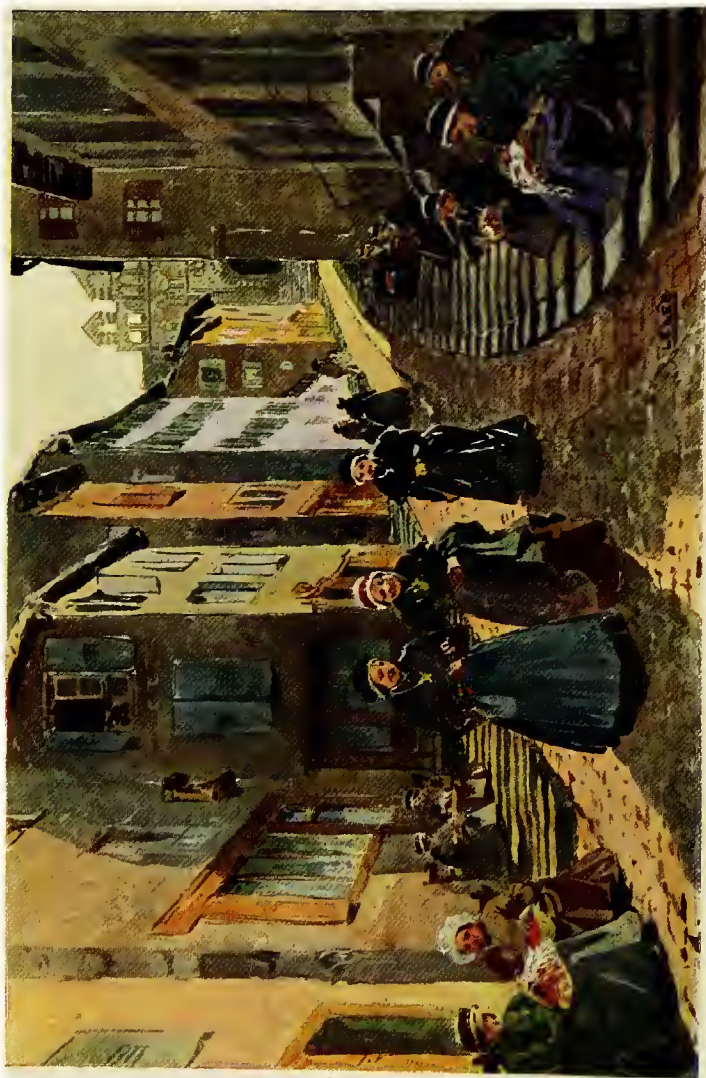
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AUVERGNE AND ITS PEOPLE

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AUVERGNE AND ITS PEOPLE

BY
FRANCES M. GOSTLING

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOUR
BY LÉOPOLD LELEE
THIRTY-TWO OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS AND A MAP

NEW YORK
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1911

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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO
MY DEAR HUSBAND
WILLIAM AYTON GOSTLING

J'aime cet âpre sol, pierreux et calciné,
Qui se pare à la fois de neige et de verdure,
Ce sol d'Auvergne, fait de lave noire et dure,
Où l'homme semble plus qu'ailleurs enraciné.

A mes yeux, sa rudesse elle-même a des charmes :
Dans les ravins creusés par ses torrents fongueux,
J'aime jusqu'aux rochers ruisselants et rugueux,
Qui semblent y pencher des visages en larmes.

J'aime ses châtaigniers rongés de vétusté,
Mais qui, drapant dans les haillons de leur écorce,
Comme en un vieux manteau royal, leur vaste torse,
Gardent tant de noblesse et tant de majesté.

J'aime à voir onduler, sous son ciel un peu pâle,
Ses landes sans fin, où bruyère et serpolet,
Entremêlant leurs fleurs d'un si doux violet,
Ont des plis somptueux de robe épiscopale.

ARSÈNE VERMENOUE

PREFACE

THIS book is about an almost undiscovered country. I find that many English people scarcely realize the difference between Auvergne and Brittany: only the other day a friend of mine asked me when my "new Breton book would be out!" So it is surely quite time some one took in hand the task of opening up this romantic and beautiful land, le Centre, as the French call it, the Heart of France, whence flow most of the fertilizing rivers on which the prosperity of the country depends.

For the French, Auvergne has a strong human interest, for, as we shall see, it has given birth to many famous men and women. And for us English these mountains and valleys have numberless stories to tell of our Plantagenet kings, and of our Black Prince and his adventurous and aggressive knights. It is one of the great Froissart districts: almost every castle is connected with the Hundred Years' War, and Auvergne simply bristles with castles.

It has its churches too, founded in the first centuries of Christianity, by missionaries sent forth, it is said, by the Apostles themselves. These churches form some of the most interesting architectural studies in France. And

above all, Auvergne has its own special indefinable charm, the charm of an exquisite country, as yet unspoiled by its contact with modern civilization.

We found our way to Auvergne some years ago, by the Valley of the Dordogne. I remember that I had some mad scheme of ascending the river in a boat, and had even entered into negotiations with an agent at Bordeaux. But fortunately we learned in time the impracticable character of the river, and took refuge in the commonplace, but useful automobile. Since then all our journeys have been taken in that fashion, though often for days together, our car has been left in the garage, while we have wandered on foot about the mountains, trying to gain some knowledge of the shy difficult people who live there. And it is thus we have grown to know something of Auvergne, and to know it is to love it. As Jean Ajalbert says: "My country is my country, that is to say, the most beautiful of all countries! There you have in one word my opinion of Auvergne."

Perhaps, not being an Auvergnat, it would be unpatriotic of me to go so far as that. But it is true that Auvergne has a character all her own. The great dead rivers of lava, the weird outlines of headless volcanoes, the strange tormented landscapes on the one hand; and on the other, the glorious invigorating mountain air, the vast rolling flower-painted plateaux, where the great cows feed, and the cheeses are made. And there are the deep intricate cañons, with their almost tropical vegetation, and foaming turbulent streams; the crags crowned with battlemented ruins; the ancient lava-built churches, where grinning monsters peep out from the

purple shadows, and Black Virgins sit enthroned above the altars. In Auvergne, too, you will find again the homely farms, with great hearths and cupboard-beds, which we know so well in Brittany; the strange superstitions and beliefs; the markets, the picturesque processions and dances, the music, the songs, the stories. For if you turn to the people, they are just as attractive as their country. Kind, hospitable, with much of the Celtic charm, and something of the French thrift and love of order, the Auvergnat is a pleasant and delightful host to visit. So far, he has been overshadowed by his more showy neighbours of Touraine and Provence. But he only requires to be known, to prove himself quite the equal of any Frenchman.

In writing this book, I have received the greatest kindness from my friends in Auvergne. From the first, they have done their best to make me feel, that it was I who was doing them a kindness, by helping to make known their beautiful country to the English-speaking world, and showers of information began to pour down upon me from every direction. I have shelves full of books and pamphlets, stacks of letters containing legends, stories, little personal details, and bits of local colour. Only last week Monsieur le Baron de Vissac, who heard of my book through a friend, proffered me, alas, too late, some kindly assistance in the form of a loan of rare old manuscripts concerning the town of Clermont. But my greatest help has come from the Mayor of Bort in Corrèze, and from his daughter, Mademoiselle Thérèse Parre. Through the two years I have been writing the book their interest and enthusiasm have never flagged, and it is to them that I owe

a great deal of what is most curious and characteristic in the following volume.

I have done my best to make this book a true picture of Auvergne ; but no one can be more conscious than myself of its imperfections. Yet if my readers will but supplement what they learn by a personal visit, I can assure them they will be most amply repaid.

FRANCES M. GOSTLING

BARNINGHAM,
WORTHING,
April 1911

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AUVERGNE AND ITS PEOPLE

CHAPTER I

Southampton Water — Saint-Malo — Vitré — Laval — Solesmes
Tours—Marmoutier—Boussac—The Black Virgin of Orcival—Arrival
at Clermont

IT is evening. There is no English word to express the colour of Southampton Water on a fine June evening; I find "nacré" suggested in my notes—nacré, like the lining of a sea-shell; and sharp and distinct against the gleaming background, the forms of great white liners, the *Dunnottar Castle* and others, in which so many of our soldiers took passage for the other world in 1900.

And so out into the Solent, to find the Isle of Wight, floating like a New Jerusalem upon a "sea of glass mingled with fire." Across the waves a path of liquid gold leading to a lake of glory in the far horizon, where hangs the setting sun, "redder than any rose." Lower he sinks, drawing over his face the mists which shroud the west, and iridescent colours gleam over the milky waves, blue fading into green, rose dying in crimson and purple. Now there is but a gash in the sky, a sharp curved streak, a point . . . ! "Au revoir!" It is over. The white cliffs rise higher and higher; in one stupendous bluff England draws back, stretching delicate fingers out over the darkening waves

in a mute gesture of farewell, and we are alone in the midst of the mysterious opal waters, beneath the brooding opal sky!

A grey morning!

As we threaded our way in among the rocky islets and drew up at the quay, the old brown walls of Saint-Malo frowned down upon us as they have always done on the English. But we found times changed since the days of Edward III., and were greeted, not with catapults and boiling water, but by the smiling agent of the Company, whose obliging function it is to assist passengers travelling "en automobile."

Now, I do not propose to take you in detail, reader, all the long road to Auvergne. My book would run into several volumes if I did. But there are glimpses caught in passing which I cannot resist recording.

There is the vision of Brittany as we hurried through on our way to the South. The dear grey land formed a fitting prologue to our holiday, a sort of "grace before meat," which no other province of France could have afforded. We were bound on a visit to an ancient Celtic land, overlooked by tourists, forgotten even by the historian and legend-hunter, and the sombre chastened beauty of Brittany alone could tune our thoughts to the simple homely scenes in which we were shortly to find ourselves.

Vitré rises before me, with its ancient castle, the lords of which claimed descent from Hoël the First, King of Northern Brittany, and nephew of our King Arthur. A beautiful old town is Vitré, filled with reminiscences of a certain Christine de Rieux, who, had she lived in our days,



A STREET IN VITRÉ

would certainly have been a militant leader of the Suffragette movement. She was, however, only a down-trodden heroine of the eighteenth century, and had to content herself with quite another kind of fighting, and merely held Vitré successfully against the attacks of the French General Mercœur and his 30,000 soldiers!

Beyond Vitré we began to exchange the grey poverty of Brittany for the rich cornfields and fragrant meadows of Mayenne, and the next picture is of our first tea-party. There, surrounded by the sunny splendour, we sat by the roadside, sipping our good English tea, and munching the cakes bought that morning in Rennes. And magpies flitted about in pairs, flaunting their new black-and-white costumes, while overhead in the elm trees, rooks talked busily, and a blackbird kept making some sarcastic remark, which I feel sure had reference to the time the kettle took to boil.

And Laval! What scenes does not the name evoke! Even as we crossed the old sixteenth-century bridge, we saw, standing up on the right, the castle, said to have been founded in the eighth century by one of Charlemagne's generals, to protect this Vallis-Guidonis from the inroads of the Bretons. As we caught sight of the old building, we paused for a moment to think of Beatrix de Gaure, Countess of Faukemberg, the good Flemish wife of Guy the Ninth, who brought weavers from Bruges, and had the people of Laval instructed in the art of making linen, an art to which, even to-day, they owe much of their prosperity. And there was that other Guy, fourteenth of the name, who started off from Laval to join the Maid of Orléans in her victorious career. Last of all there rises before us the pathetic figure of Antoine Philippe de la

Trémouille, Prince de Talmont, beheaded during the Revolution, before the gate of the old castle, from which his family had for so long ruled this province of France. For these lords of Laval were very haughty persons, styling themselves "cousins of the King." Their great war-cry, "Py-Laval!" often startled the English during the Hundred Years' War. Indeed, the whole town is full of legends, which followed me even to the great bedroom of the Hôtel de l'Ouest, together with the perfume of hay, with which the evening was sweet.

I think it was near Sablé that we came across a striking result of the recent troubles of the Church in France. On a bank, high above the river, stands the monastery of Solesmes. The building was in course of being thoroughly restored and enlarged, when the difficulties arose between the French Government and the Pope, the monks being driven out and obliged to fly. It was a curious and melancholy sight to see the magnificent building all but finished, yet deserted and empty. With difficulty we gained access, and found our walk through the monastery somewhat enlightening as to the requirements of present-day monastic life—the heating arrangements, the bathrooms, the large well-ventilated cells; yet leading from the Superior's bedchamber, we noticed a quite mediæval secret staircase, whence the whole monastery might be visited without the knowledge of the monks.

"Jesus Christ didn't spy upon His apostles like that, but to be sure one of them betrayed Him!" observed the porter who took us round. He was a quaint old fellow, much given to drawing comparisons between the life of the late abbot and that of our Saviour, whom he invari-

ably styled "the Head of the Benedictines." "HE didn't have hot-water pipes laid under His bed!" said he, pointing scornfully to the comfortable contrivance. "Indeed I've heard tell that He didn't know sometimes where to lay His head! Ah well, times change, eh Madame? Eighty of His followers had plenty of room to lay theirs, and their bodies too, in this abbey."

But as I went through the great kitchens, I could easily picture the good Abbé Guéranger and his friend Dom Fontenine, cooking their first frugal meal in the monastery in 1832. Certainly there was no superfluous luxury at Solesmes in those days. "I am writing to you," says Dom Guéranger in a letter to his brother Edward, "seated at the chimney corner of our dear abbey. Dom Gilbert is beside me attending to the roasting of a fowl, and making some cabbage soup. Dom Morin, in his white apron, is laying the table, while Dom Fontenine is washing plates and dishes, and attending to the salt, butter, and a thousand other excellent things." This Dom Guéranger must have been a wonderful man. The Benedictines had, by the end of the eighteenth century, all but died out of France, and the humble abbé by his zeal and devotion, not only revived the order, but made Solesmes one of the most noted of monasteries.¹

In the chapel we found wonderful groups of statuary, dating from the fifteenth century. But the remembrance which comes most readily before me as I recall Solesmes, is that of the porter's little garden, a tangle of humble

¹ A few years ago, when the monks of Solesmes were ejected from their country, they crossed over and settled in the Isle of Wight, at a new abbey of Solesmes, where they now live, under the Benedictine rule. Like most of their order, they are famed for their fine Gregorian singing.

monthly roses doing their best to hide the half-hewn masses of stone and richly carved capitals, which lay waiting for the hands which were never to come and fit them into place !

It was toward evening that the rolling country and rich cornfields showed that we were nearing Tours, and presently lying below, in the broad valley of the Loire, we saw the ancient city of Saint Martin, the twin towers of its cathedral glowing in the setting sun.

Everyone knows Saint Martin, just as everyone knows Tours. The stories told of the great bishop are legion, some befitting a heathen wizard better than a Christian saint. Besides being that Martin who gave half his cloak to a beggar one snowy day, who cured the blind, the deaf, the sick, and the lame, who raised the very dead, he was, as his name signifies, a "marzin" or "marvel," like Merlin the Enchanter, with whom, indeed, he has been very often confounded. Possessed of strange powers over the elements, he could still tempests, quench fire, walk unseen ! To-day he lies in a deep crypt below the high altar of the new basilica, which has been raised on the site of the old abbey church of former days.¹

But Tours is not only associated with Saint Martin. There is also the great historian Gregory, to whom we owe most of the knowledge we have of Merovingian times. He was a native of Auvergne, and as we shall meet him

¹ During the Middle Ages, the abbey of Tours was one of the richest shrines in Europe, and kings and emperors vied with each other in their devotion to Saint Martin. We find the Merovingian Chilperic, King of Soissons, sending to ask advice from the dead saint, as though he had been the Oracle of Delphi, and actually enclosing three blank pages for the expected reply. Such was the faith of those days !

again at Clermont, it is but courteous to pause for a moment, and pay our respects to him in the cathedral of which he was once bishop,

But others have lingered at Tours, and Auvergne is waiting, waiting with its mountains and unexplored sanctuaries. Yet let us run out to Marmoutier, the monastery which grew up around the cave to which Bishop Martin used to retire for solitude. Few of us would object to spend some time, now and again, in the restful quiet of that honeycombed cliff overlooking the Loire. Seated on one of the terraces which connect the Chapel of the Seven Sleepers with the various hermits' caves, soothed by the humming of bees and the perfume of roses and wild pinks, one might very well find relaxation there, after the stress and strain of city life. In one of the caves there are traces of an old sixth-century saint, one Léobard, who also came from Auvergne. A very extraordinary person must this Léobard have been, a sort of human mole, with a quite prehistoric taste for burrowing in the rock. Had he lived in modern times, he would probably have expended his surplus energy in boring a new tunnel through the Alps; as it was, he spent his days enlarging and fitting up his cell in a fashion of his own, with a deep well at the far end, intended as a burial-place. Here, in fact, he *did* lie, till the mediæval craze came for collecting indiscriminate relics, when his bones were taken up, and translated to the neighbouring Cathedral of Tours, where later they were found and burned by the Huguenots.¹

Close to Marmoutier is found the Chapel of Saint Radegonde, most charming and picturesque of heroines. It was the first example I had seen of a rock church,

¹ For Saint Léobard see chap. xii.

hollowed out as it is in the low cliff which runs along this bank of the Loire. In the dark cave opening out of the back of the chapel, Saint Gatien, first missionary to this part of Gaul, had his abode.

A young priest was saying Mass in the chapel when we arrived, and as soon as he had finished, and the handful of peasants had departed, he took us into the inner shrine, and showed us, leading up through the rock, the ancient stone steps which, in the days of the hermit, formed the only exit from the cell. From this priest I learned that Gatien was one of the Shepherds of Bethlehem, and that he was sent out by Saint Peter, together with Austremoine of Clérmont, George of le Puy, Saturnin of Toulouse, and several others, to Christianize Gaul. I believe he was the only one of them who escaped a violent death, a fact he probably owed to the extraordinary nature of his hiding-place.

At Loches we will not linger. This town of the Plantagenets deserves more than a passing note, and I hope to describe it in detail some other day. For this journey we must leave it, and hasten on.

There is an afternoon, which returns to my memory like a sunny dream, a vision of vineyards and cornfields, avenues of Spanish chestnuts, white-walled vine-draped cottages. For some time we have had the company of the Indre meandering through grass and willows on our left; and the country is like an old Persian carpet, yellow, grey, and green, with a blue blue sky overhead, where a flock of fleecy clouds are pasturing. On the grass beside the road, many geese are feeding, all unmindful of their approaching fate; for are we not in the land of Pâté de Foie Gras!

It was that same day, soon after tea, which we drank beside a little stream overhung by a chestnut tree heavy with scented blossom, that we found ourselves on a height looking out over the vast plain of Boussac. For a moment the view lay before us uncertain, as a half-forgotten story, and we drew up instinctively, letting our eyes wander for a time over this country which George Sand has immortalized. Then the ground seemed to sink away, there was a swift rush of air, the vision materialized, and we found ourselves among the realities of the plain. This Berry is almost unbroken ground so far as the tourist is concerned. Even the French know little of it, save from the pages of the author of "Jeanne."

We found a statue of the great writer standing in the square of the picturesque town of La Châtre, and then, as the shadows were beginning to lengthen, hastened on toward Boussac, where she lived and wrote.

A sky of Polar blue, with white mountainous clouds below, and above, long grey streaks, like the wings of vast primeval sea-birds! . . . On the sleeve of my fur coat a lovely little green beetle, and one or two brick-red lady-birds, who seem determined to travel the rest of the way with us! As evening deepens, groups of white-capped women, and men in blue blouses coming home from the fields! . . . Now a storm is gathering, the sky becomes wild and livid, the distance so unnaturally clear that, far away, we fancy we can see the purple mountains of Auvergne. Then suddenly we were recalled to ourselves by a steep descent, newly covered by the cruellest of flints, over which our poor car hobbled painfully on her rubber soles. However, we humoured and coaxed her, and presently she forgot her troubles, for, at the bottom of the

hill, we found Boussac, quaint, old, and charming. Boussac is one of the places to which I always hope to return, if only to stay at the dear inn, with its wandering passages, and great panelled dining-room, where, after making our usual restricted toilet, we partook of an astounding supper of many courses, waited on by one of those Mongolian survivals who haunt the province of Berry.

It is the castle of Boussac which is her pride and glory. It stands on a rock, high above the river gorge, one side looking down into the steep ravine, the other opening on to a great courtyard, full of whispering beech trees. I heard much of it that same evening, from the barber, a most loquacious person, who, while he shaved my husband, told us stories of the great family of Brosse who once inhabited the fortress, and so excited me that all night long I lay in my red-curtained bed, dreaming that Jean de Brosse, Marshal of Boussac, was clanking about the room in his armour, while the Maid of Orléans was trying to shave him with the sword given her by the Governor of Vaucouleurs !

Next morning we found our way to the castle, now the abode of the Sous-Préfet. Above the entrance door is carved the casque of Jean de Brosse, and while we were waiting for permission to enter, I sat by an old well, and so overheard the beech trees telling stories of Jean's boyhood : how he played here in the castle-yard with his sisters Antoinette, Blanche, and Catherine, and of the coming of his young wife Jeanne de Naillac, and how she wept when he left her and her baby, to go away to the court at Chinon.

Then the door was opened, and we went into the dark entrance and down to the great banqueting-hall, with its huge hearth, and up the stone stairs to the little salon where



THE CASTLE OF BOUSSAC FROM THE RIVER

George Sand wrote her novels. I can imagine no surroundings more inspiring! Given a pencil and some notebooks, the most "finished and finite clod" could there turn out something worth reading! No visitors, save the heroes and heroines of the past; no afternoon calls, save to the curé to learn some details as to a local saint; no neighbours, save the old, white-capped story-teller, who lives in the little cottage by the bridge, at foot of the castle rock. All day long the sun would shine in at the window, the sweet warm scent of hay would fill the room, while up from below would come the murmur of the stream, as it brushed past the base of the hill. And, in the evening, strange moths and fairy-winged things would fly in to dance round the lamp, which, like a beacon, was shining over the broad plain. Yes, I think one could write at Boussac!

Evening! I cannot recall the details of the past day. In looking back I find myself, for a moment, in a chapel, where is a very ancient painted stone statue of Saint Loup, and an old woman is telling me that it preserves the neighbourhood from thunder and hail! She shows me another and more modern image of the saint, which is carried in procession, but which has none of the occult powers of the weird-looking old demon, before which hang the votive offerings!

Again, we are running down a deep glacier-worn gorge, at the bottom of which we come upon a strange-looking town, that I learn is Aubusson, the birthplace of those wonderful tapestries which once hung in the banqueting-hall of Boussac, and were known as "Les Tapisseries de la Dame à la Licorne."¹ It was at

¹ These tapestries are now in the Cluny Museum, Paris.

Aubusson we lunched in company with many dogs and sporting farmers, and the house was full of the scent of white lilies, which the landlady was steeping in spirit to use as an embrocation.

All that afternoon I have a remembrance of climbing, climbing, climbing; of leagues upon leagues of pearly distance, shot with glancing gleaming colours, like the jewelled foundations of the Holy City. The breeze was full of the scent of heather, and all dry sweet summer perfumes, yet fresh and invigorating, as befits the breath of the Plateau des Mille Vaches, where the grassy rounded summits make one think of the backs of gigantic cows, pasturing over the mountains.

At last we entered a lonely valley, where was a great Romanesque church, and stalls for the sale of rosaries and other objects of devotion, marking it as a resort of pilgrims. And indeed I had heard of the Black Virgin of Orcival, one of those ancient and mysterious Madonnas we find presiding over so many of the shrines of Auvergne. As I entered the heavy building, an old woman rose from behind the door and proffered me a candle. "It will do Madame no harm, even though she is a foreigner!" said she, seeing me hesitate for a moment. "All the world may come to offer homage to Our Lady of Orcival." Then, while the candle was being lighted and placed on the stand, she told me the legend of the coming of Christianity to Orcival.

"It is now many years ago," she said, "since the Blessed Virgin was in the habit of travelling about Auvergne, showering her blessings around her. One day, at sunset, she came to the village of Vitrac. Madame knows it?"

I shook my head.

"So much the better : they are bad people, the Vitracois. Behold how they treated Our Lady. She was weary of wandering. 'Build me a little chapel,' said she, 'that I may rest among you, and wander no more.' But would you believe it, Madame, these hard-hearted and avaricious people chased her pitilessly away! Chased the Queen of Heaven from their village! Ah, well! à quelque chose malheur est bon! Perhaps, save for their wickedness, she might never have come to us! In spite of her fatigue, La Sainte Vierge saw herself obliged to continue her route. At last she stopped at Orcival. What happiness for our town! The inhabitants immediately recognized in her the Mother of God, and built a chapel, which quickly grew into this splendid basilica. Their act of faith brought about the salvation of their souls, and made this country a country of miracles."

"I wonder what the people of Vitrac thought about it?" said I.

"Ah," said the woman, chuckling, "they were not slow in coming to a knowledge of their gross and unpardonable sin, and I must say for them that they did their best to repair their fault. Just where the Blessed Virgin rested, they raised a calvary, and there it still stands, at the entrance to their village. People go and pray before it, that vengeance may be kept far from their dwellings, and every year the Vitracois come in great numbers to ask forgiveness of Our Lady of Orcival. Madame knows that it was the blessed Saint Luke himself who carved the statue?" she concluded.

I replied that I had heard the legend.

"It is no legend," said the old dame indignantly, "the

statue was carved from life. That, no doubt, is the reason it is so miraculous."

"What is it good for?" I inquired.

"Mais pour tout, naturally, particularly for delivering those in captivity." And I called to mind a story I had read of a man of Plauzet, who was being taken as a prisoner to Paris, where he was to be executed for some political offence, of which he was innocent. Arrived at Moulins, his guards went to sleep after tying him to the bedpost. Then it was that the prisoner called to mind his local deity, and evoked her under the name of Notre Dame d'Orcival. Immediately his bonds were loosed, the locked door opened, and he escaped.

"Before the statue of Our Lady was brought here," continued the woman, "they say that the people were heathens, and worshipped a god called Orcus," and she crossed herself and glanced up at the dark impassive face of the statue, as though apologizing for mentioning the god of the infernal regions in her presence.

"In those days, there were many bears in Orcival, and it is from them that the valley takes its name. But since the coming of the Blessed Virgin, they have all disappeared, so that, as the saying goes, it is no longer an 'Orcival' (valley of bears) but a retreat for angels."

Wherever the old dame got the idea, it is an ingenious derivation, though it is far more likely that the valley took its name from that very "Orcus," the Gaulish god of death, to whom the shrine was once dedicated.

The statue itself is extremely ancient, carved from the heart of some very hard and durable tree. The sculptor, however, was more probably an ancient Druid priest than the apostle Saint Luke!

And now it is evening ! For some time we have been winding round the base of a great mountain, which, from its size, can be no other than the Puy de Dôme. Kingly and majestic it stands, "still wearing, like a crown on its round Celtic head, the ruins of the temple, placed there by the greatest of nations."

As we hurry past, it towers above us, this ghostly monarch of Auvergne, till presently, on the right, a valley opens, or rather the ground on that side sinks away to a much lower level, leaving us high up on the side of the mountain looking down to where, a thousand feet below, lies Clermont, purple and fairy-like.

And beyond Clermont stretches the wide Limagne. How can I picture the Limagne ? Fifteen hundred years ago Sidonius Apollinaris wrote of it : "I cannot describe to you the peculiar charm of this country. Over a pastoral ocean, billows of precious harvest are tossing. The more a man travels across it, the more certain is he of escaping shipwreck, so gentle is it to voyagers, so fruitful to labourers, so generous to huntsmen. The mountains form a girdle of pasturage, flanked by a girdle of vines. There are farms in the country, castles on the rocks, forests in the dark corners, rich cornfields in the plains, streams run along the valleys, and torrents rush down the mountain gorges. In fact, strangers visiting such a country lose the memory of their native land ! . . ."

And since then the Limagne has but developed in beauty.

Guy de Maupassant says of it : "Before her, like a mighty ocean, lay a boundless plain. Veiled in delicate blue mist, it stretched away and away toward the vague far distant mountains. And beneath the fine translucent

haze, which floated over this vast extent of country, could be seen towns, villages, forests, great yellow squares of ripe corn, great green squares of meadowland, factories with tall red chimneys, church steeples black and pointed, built from the lava of ancient volcanoes."

For us, the shadows were darkening over the Limagne. Those "vague far-distant mountains" had drawn back behind the curtains of the night, and, as we flew down the long smooth road, past Château Michelin, the lights of Clermont began to twinkle through the purple darkness, till suddenly we found ourselves in all the commotion, traffic, and electric radiance of the Place de Jaude.

CHAPTER II

The Puy de Dôme—Beaumont—Romagnat—The Plateau of Gergovia—The Story of Vercingetorix

SO this is Auvergne! I have thrown back the shutters of my bedroom, and, stepping on to the little balcony, find myself face to face with the Puy de Dôme! It is true that between us lies all the life of Clermont, houses shops, the Place de Jaude shaded by trees, threaded in every direction by electric trams, and thronged by a busy hurrying crowd of men and women. But my eyes see only two objects, the Man and the Mountain, they represent Auvergne, the Auvergne of my dreams.

For the Man, there he is close at hand, set high on a pedestal in the midst of the Place, a noble bronze figure in the casque of the ancient Arverni, riding his plunging charger barebacked, and trampling underfoot a fallen foe. No need of the inscription to tell the name of the hero! The fame of Vercingetorix is as eternal as the giant Mountain toward which he is waving his short unwieldy sword.

I think it was Michelet who described Clermont as a "town where every vista seems shut in by the Puy de Dôme." It is equally true to say that every street leads back to the statue of Vercingetorix; for all the life of Clermont centres in the Place de Jaude, and in the midst of the Place stands the hero! No wonder that one grows to regard him as emblematic of the race, just as one thinks of the Puy de Dôme as typical of the district.

How many mornings has not the Mountain tempted us forth for a ramble upon its golden flanks and among its purple valleys, and how many evenings has not the great patriot welcomed us home to the substantial comforts of the Hôtel de l'Univers !

They have many things in common. Both have been conquered. Round the sides of the Mountain the ever-advancing tide of civilization has wound its way upward in the form of a snorting, puffing, smoke-vomiting railway train. And the Man, who for a time kept at bay great Cæsar himself, died miserably, strangled in a Roman dungeon. But in the cause of progress such reverses are inevitable, and indeed who shall resent the new *régime*? Not I, as I sit in the little train, and think of the weary straining horses of former days, toiling up the mountain, or the still more weary pilgrims, who climbed upward to the great Gaulish temple of the god Lug, which formerly crowned the summit. And not the great patriot himself, be sure, if, in that Druid Paradise to which he has gone, he realizes all that Roman law, education, and cleanliness have done for his beloved country.

Truly—

“The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world !”

The shrine of the god Lug, rebuilt, rebeautified, renamed, becomes the Roman temple of Mercury, and later, when Christianity invades the land, the principal meeting-place of sorcerers, where “every witch in France, possessed of a broomstick, hastened on the night of Saint Jean” to worship the old pagan god, under his new name of Satan. Later, the spot is said to have been cleansed, and sanctified by a chapel to Saint Barnabas, and in these

materialistic days is occupied by a scientific observatory, a railway shed, and a refreshment room !

It was a glorious day, hot as one likes to have it in Auvergne. As I sat sipping the coffee, which Alphonse the waiter had obligingly brought together with the boots and hot water, I kept gazing and gazing at the vast rounded form, gleaming through its transparent garment of mist, like some high priest shrouding himself in the diaphanous folds of his surplice. At last I could resist no longer.

"Never mind about unpacking," said I, "let us go ! I want to get to the top of something ! After all the Mountain was there before anything else. Let us go up the Mountain !"

We found the little train already crowded, for the pilgrimage seems more popular than ever, since the gods of health and pleasure set up their shrines on the Mountain.

And indeed, from that point of view, most of the passengers were regular pilgrims. They had field-glasses instead of rosaries, guide-books by way of breviaries, while many carried cameras in which to bear away impressions, even as the ancient pilgrims no doubt took flasks to contain the healing waters served out to them at the temple. For the most part, they were a happy merry set, and laughed and made jokes at the heat, as they mopped their red faces and took off their damp collars. One lady insisted on my eating a peppermint lozenge, saying it would cool me ! I had not the strength of mind to refuse so kindly meant an offer, but it had by no means the desired effect, and it made me uncomfortable for a long time !

At last, when every seat was full, and all the standing space, inside and out, packed like a political meeting, we

set off. The engine apparently felt the heat as much as we did, and puffed in a quite apoplectic manner. There is no station to leave, you merely find the little train labelled "Au sommet," waiting casually in the street, and when the ticket clerk is satisfied that he cannot ram in another baby, you start.

A little past Chamalières, with its ancient and picturesque church (where, by the by, was once treasured one of the nails from our Saviour's cross, very useful in cases of blindness), the road begins rising, and soon gains such an elevation that Clermont appears lying far below, clustering round the base of its purple cathedral. Behind the city stretches a plain, growing flatter and broader as we rise higher. Now we stop! "La Baraque," shouts the guard; but no one descends. All are for "Le Sommet."

La Baraque lies on the edge of the plateau, the great tableland from which spring the Puys. And now, after threading our way for some time among cornfields and meadows, we find ourselves approaching the final cone, and see the railway winding up before us like some gigantic snake.

With great difficulty and much stoking, the engine panted its way upward, every moment the view growing more superb, more vast. The air had become cooler, jackets were put on, collars turned up, and all the time there was a running fire of ecstatic exclamations. "Ravissant! Regardez donc, Lucile, comme c'est grandiose!" The lady of the peppermints became a little nervous as the gradient grew steeper. "Mon Dieu!" I heard her exclaim more than once. But for the most part the pilgrims appeared to have good nerves, and the general opinion seemed to be that it was "épatant!"

And now the sides of the Mountain grow so steep that

the surface has to be held in places by stakes, which give one an uncomfortable sense of insecurity, as one glances down at the landscape lying two thousand feet below!

At the top we found a cold wind blowing, and were glad to shelter in one of the alcoves which still exist on the south side of the great ruined temple. Thence we could look down over the plateau, to the rolling plain beyond. What a view! From that height, the enormous landscape looks almost flat, stretching away on every side to the misty horizon, where stand purple mountains, vague, mysterious.

Starting almost from our feet runs a river of lava, wild and rough, piled wave upon wave in sinister confusion, winding its way round ancient volcanoes, which look as though they had boiled up and burst; and each showing plainly, in spite of the overgrowth of grass and bushes, the rounded dip of its cratered summit. The whole makes one think of an enormous seething cauldron, suddenly petrified at the moment it was boiling its hardest; or of one of those lunar landscapes, with which Jules Verne has made us familiar. It is the most extraordinary sight in the world! Nothing can be more weird, nothing more suggestive of the turbulent convulsive youth through which our planet has passed.

What a spectacle it must have been when all this district was ablaze! When streams of molten lava were flowing slowly over the plain, licking up forests, rivers, lakes; when the sky was darkened with smoke, and the only light came from the great volcanoes which stood like torches, belching out fire and ashes. Some people tell us that man was already in existence during the volcanic period in Auvergne. I wonder what his palæolithic brain thought of it all!

We sat enjoying the weirdly beautiful scene for some time, picking out the little lava-built villages which crest the hills, and letting our eyes wander over the distant plain of the Limagne. Truly this is the centre of France, the seigneurial motte, on which the Gaulish god sat surveying and ruling his domain.

"It makes me think of Greece more than any other country," said I, "Greece and Wales and Scotland, and a little of Ireland and Brittany and Cornwall, but I don't know why!"

"I don't know why either," replied my husband, "but you have picked out some of the very countries which, like Auvergne, are the most ancient in Europe, and which, when the rest of the land was under water, stood up above the flood much as it does now above the plains of France. Such countries form part of the very skeleton of the earth."

Presently it grew so cold that we went to the hotel. We found it a pathetic place, presided over by two lean dogs of doubtful parentage, who hungrily devoured the sawdust cakes which accompanied my cup of coffee. Around the walls were notices offering everything one was not likely to want—ices, baths, mineral waters, special terms for a stay of some time! But the great object of everyone, after struggling round the summit, seemed to be to get something hot to drink, and to secure a nice warm seat for the homeward journey. The landlady, seeing that I was a stranger, tried her best, poor thing, to induce me to stay the night.

"Il faut passer la nuit au sommet, Madame, pour assister au lever du soleil!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands eagerly; "c'est un enchantement devant un spectacle inoubliable!" The atmosphere suggesting, however, that the

beds might be equally "inoubliable," we decided to take our chance of witnessing the sunrise before something warmer than the "spectacle," and hastened to take our seats in the train.

The only comfortable place on the mountain is the shed where the locomotive reposes during its periodical visits ; it is at least sheltered from the wild spirits of the air which haunt the top of the mountain. Here I sat cosily between two fat priests, till the toy trumpet sounded, and, with much groaning and rattling, we began creeping down the steep corkscrew track.

As we wound slowly down the mountain, we naturally kept changing our point of view, and could observe the vast landscape from every direction. Descending from a height is always a strange sensation. On the summit, the chief feeling is one of solitude ; the consciousness of self becomes intense and overwhelming. There, at our feet, lies the world, such a little thing ; a province to be glanced over in a moment, a city that would lie in one's hand. The great cathedral there, the castle on the rock, mere charms to be worn on the watch-chain. With a field-glass one can distinguish tiny dots as carriages, motors, trains. But it is all so small, so insignificant, that one ceases to realize that the people inhabiting them are of the same importance as we are. The great SELF on the Mountain is the only personality of which one is aware. Then we begin to sink downward, bushes become trees, dark patches forests, toy villages cities, the little "charm" grows into the great Gothic cathedral of Clermont—strangest sensation of all, we find ourselves back in the busy noisy Place de Jaude, surrounded by our fellow-men and women, just one of the crowd ! Like Moses, we have come down from the mountain !

Clermont has one drawback—it is very noisy! Of course no large town can be as quiet as the country, especially if it happens to be the centre of the automobile industry, but one does expect even townspeople to go to sleep sometimes!

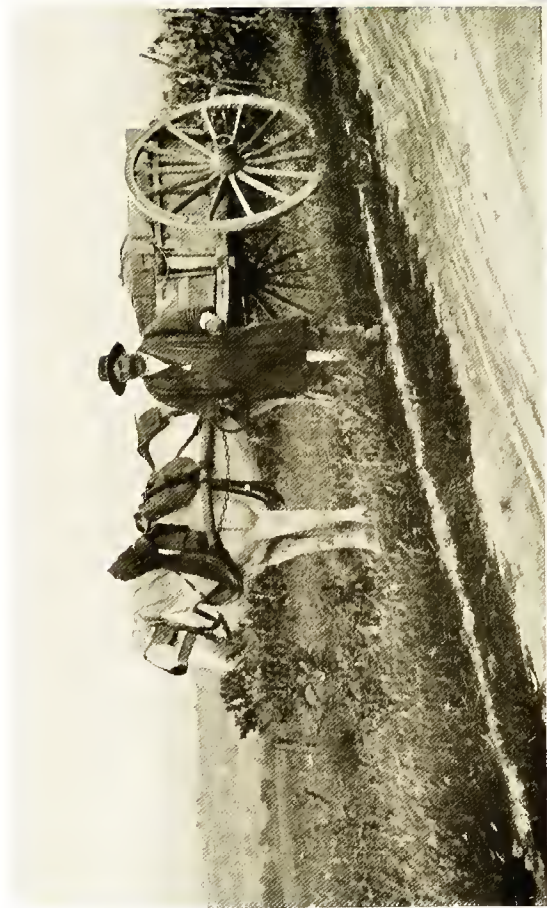
Unfortunately, our room was situated over a popular café. In other respects it was a pleasant room, large, well-appointed, and cheerful. But considered as a place to sleep in, it was a distinct failure; indeed the noise from below, particularly at night, was so appalling, that it became a necessity during the day to get out into the quiet country, where the strains of the band, and the noise of broken glasses and broken tempers could not reach us.

So, during the week's stay, we got into the habit of wandering off for long days among the hills, lunching at any little inn we could find, and talking to the vine-dressers, church cleaners, lace-makers, in fact to anyone who had time for a gossip, as most people seem to have in Auvergne.

We did not take the automobile on these expeditions. Even the best of friends sometimes feel the necessity of a temporary separation. We left it at "Bastide's," and rambled off, much as Adam and Eve may have done when they set out to explore Paradise.

It was on one of these occasions that we found our way to Gergovia, the great oblong flat-topped table of basalt, which forms such a striking object in the landscape to the south of Clermont. I wish I had time to take my reader all the road to Gergovia.

There was Beaumont, pretty little Beaumont, lying among its vineyards, crowned still by the ancient and beautiful church which once formed part of the abbey



A VINE DRESSER OF BEAUMONT

of Beaumont, as is testified by the carved funeral slabs of various noble abbesses. It was there we found a statue of the curious and little-known Saint Verney, patron of vine-growers, who must surely be the Christian representative of the god Bacchus, once worshipped in this neighbourhood. We were photographing the strange little manikin with his dog at his side, his pruning-knife in his hand, and, hanging to his belt, his dinner tied up in a handkerchief, and one of the identical wooden casks in which every workman of Auvergne carries his day's allowance of wine, when two boys came in to ring the Angelus. They looked surprised at finding me in the pulpit, but seemed quite gratified that I should be photographing Saint Verney, who, they told me, was the patron saint of the district. It seems that he was the only child of a vine-dresser, and so good and pious that all parents used to hold him up as an example to their own boys. In those days, the neighbourhood was much disturbed by the presence of a large number of Jews, and so it is no surprise to find a Jewish workman living there, whose children were the pest of the place. Aggravated by having the perfections of young Verney constantly flung in his face, this malicious Israelite one day enticed the little boy to a lonely spot among the vine-clad hills, and there crucified him, head downwards.

"And when is his festival?" I asked.

"On the 19th day of April," replied one of the boys. "He is taken in procession round the vineyards; it makes the vines shoot."

"And he has bunches of grapes, that we keep from the year before, hung all round him!" said the other eagerly. "And my grandfather says that when *he* was young, they used to wash Saint Verney's feet with wine!"

"I don't believe that!" said the first boy sceptically; "no one would be so silly as to waste good wine in such a way!"

"How do you know they wasted it?" asked the other slyly; "how do you know the priest didn't drink it afterwards?"

"Well, at all events, it isn't done now!" replied the first boy.

And after Beaumont there was Romagnat, where we had lunch, and a fine trouble we had to get it too, for there was no inn, and the little wine-shop, which was our only hope, was all in disorder, the roof having fallen in only the week before. However, with a little persuasion we induced the woman of the house to cook us an omelette, and while she did so, sat down at the kitchen table, to whet our appetites on home-made sausage. She turned out to be an excellent cook, and took great pride in showing me every detail of her culinary efforts. Thus, when she had broken the eggs, she brought me the basin, and made me smell them, laughing and nodding delightedly when I pointed to the hens which were pecking round the door. Likewise with the bacon—for it was to be an "omelette au lard," the best of all dishes in Auvergne—when the time came for adding it, she went running into the next room, and came back with a very ancient and somewhat fusty-looking strip of fat, which she exhibited with much satisfaction, before cutting it up and putting it into the pan. Her delight knew no bounds, when I said, what was perfectly true, that I had never enjoyed anything more. She was a nice-looking young woman of the Celtic type, and a kind girl also; it was a pleasure to see her with her two great dogs, her chickens, and her many cats and kittens, to whom she had taught all manner of tricks, and for



THE ROAD TO ROMAGNAT

whom a special dinner had been prepared in a large pot that stood on the hearthstone.

Here, as at Beaumont, we found a most wonderful church, with early Roman pillars, on which are carved wolves' heads and other strange devices. Here too we found Saint Verney presiding, and before his altar a very ancient woman. She sat there meditating, her skin so dry and wrinkled, her eyes so faded and dull, that she looked as though she might have been the saint's grandmother, and I longed to ask her more about his legend, which is very rare and difficult to trace. She seemed, however, to have begun some endless litany, and, as we still had the longest part of our walk before us, we left her to her devotions.

There is an exquisite little woodland path leading up from Romagnat to the plateau, a path by which it pleased me to think that Cæsar may have climbed when he made his attack upon the fortress, and certainly a path by which Vercingetorix must have passed, many and many a time. It leads steeply upward, through an undergrowth of bracken and nut bushes, and is sheltered from the sun by a row of cherry trees, which just then were crimson with fruit.

And now we are on the summit, at the extreme end of the long table-like plateau. Around are other strange flat-topped mountains, rising from the turquoise mist of heat which overhangs the broad plain. What a site to choose for the ancient capital of Auvergne! To the north stands the Puy de Dôme with its attendant satellites; to the south, very far off, can be seen the Puy de Sancy, and all the rest of the view is like a great picture I once saw in the Louvre, called "Space," a vast billowy ocean of delicate greens and greys and lavenders, stained here and there by the shadows of the soft white clouds which hang in the sapphire sky.

As I wander among the grass-grown ruins of what, two thousand years ago, was Gergovia, I can still trace the lines of the streets, the plans of the houses, or think I can, which is much the same thing. Here is a large open space, possibly the square in which Celtill, the father of Vercingetorix, was burned alive by his jealous brother chieftains, because, by his superior bravery and talent, he had raised himself to be their leader. I wonder whether his young son was forced to look on at the terrible sight; it would be quite in character with the barbarism of the time, when it was still the fashion to cut off the heads of all vanquished foes, string them together, and hang them in festoons to the horses' necks and flanks.

These mounds may cover the foundations of the great rude palace where the feasts were held, and where the chiefs sat at a huge round table like that of King Arthur, so jealous were the Celts, so anxious all to be first. Surrounding the chiefs stood the heralds and men-at-arms, forming two concentric circles, the first holding lances, the second armed with bucklers.

The food was served to the chiefs on copper, bronze, or silver dishes, the greatest care being taken to reserve the best pieces for the most distinguished guests. In the case of a pig, the tail was reckoned the choicest morsel, and it was not at all uncommon for deadly feuds to arise over a slight mistake in the serving of the meat, so that these feasts quite commonly ended in bloodshed!

But the ruins of Gergovia are ruins, absolute and complete. It is better to turn one's eyes again to the view, for *there* little has changed. To the east, behind that hill, where you see the village nestling, flows the river Allier, over which Cæsar built his hurried bridge. We are told that the great Roman general had done his best to gain

young Vercingetorix as an ally, even going the length of offering to make him king over the Arverni, if he would swear allegiance to Rome. But Cæsar knew little of the patriotic spirit with which he was dealing. Vercingetorix refused the offer with horror, and called all the chiefs together here at Gergovia, where he had established himself. His plan of campaign was simple—namely, by burning the crops to starve the Romans out of the country. The peasants began well, for in one day more than twenty towns, with all their corn land, were destroyed. But when they came to Bourges they hesitated, for its inhabitants pleaded that it was the finest city of Gaul, the pride and glory of the land (as it has ever remained), and so they spared it. But it cost them dear! Having managed to take it by assault, Cæsar made it his headquarters, and from it spread terror through the country.

Come and sit by me among the ruined walls of Gergovia. How still it is up here on the height! Only the rye whispers the story, the rye and the cornflowers and the wild pinks and larkspur. I suppose the ancestors of these flowers saw the coming of the Romans, and heard their vain attacks on the fortifications which had been built round the steep sides of the plateau. Here on this very spot, Vercingetorix may have stood watching. With very little imagination, we can see his noble young face and form, armed as he is represented in the Place de Jaude, and wearing a winged casque, such as you see at the top of the monument yonder. Again and again the Romans attack the fortress, and every time are beaten back. At last Cæsar, watching and directing operations from that hill, called even to-day the "Hill of Cæsar," gives command that some of his men shall pretend to assault a certain height commanding Gergovia—perhaps Roche Blanche, to

which we will go presently. The ruse succeeded. The Arverni pursued them, leaving their city almost undefended. Already the Romans were climbing the inner wall of Gergovia, when the cries of women and children reached the ears of Vercingetorix. Looking back, he saw the danger, and returned just in time. The vengeance he took must have been terrible! The Romans, taken in the flank, were cast down from the town to the camp, from the camp over the edge of the mountain. Even according to Cæsar's account, forty-six centurions were left dead, and the ruin would have been complete, had not the Roman general himself advanced from his hill with his tenth legion, and covered the retreat of the remnants of his army.

Standing beside the "Casque of Vercingetorix," we can watch the way toward the Allier, taken by Cæsar, the enemy in hot pursuit. Once they caught him up, gave him a second beating, and deprived him of his sword, which he found later, hanging as a trophy in one of the Gaulish temples.

But there is a darker side to the story of Vercingetorix. Here, at Gergovia, we think of him only as the great, successful, popular leader. As the monument which has been raised to his honour says—

"IN HIS LOCIS DUX ARVERNORUM VERCINGETORIX CÆSAREM
INVADENTEM PROFLIGAVIT."

Yes, but that is not the end of the story!

It is some months later. Cæsar's turn has come. The Gauls are straitly shut up in the city of Alesia, and are starving, some even suggesting that it would be well to kill and eat those unfit for warfare, as had been done by their ancestors in the war against the Cimbri and Teutons. But Vercingetorix will not hear of the horrible idea.

"It is I whom Cæsar hates!" says he. "It has always been I! If he has me, he will pardon you!"

So, dressing himself in his most splendid clothes, his close-fitting, gold-embroidered "braccæ" or breeches, his "sagum" or plaid fastened on the shoulder over his gorgeous, blouse-like "caracalla," his fair hair combed and curling on his shoulders, and neck and arms glittering with jewelled collars and bracelets, he put on his winged helmet—"fait d'un crâne de bête, où l'on voit s'éployer des ailes de gerfauts," as the poet of Auvergne, Arsène Vermeuouse has it—and taking his sword in his hand, mounted his war-horse, and rode out of the city gate.

Cæsar, we are told, had seated himself at the head of the lines in front of the camp. Riding at full gallop, the chief of the Arverni circled round and round the Roman, till, stopping suddenly, he dismounted, threw off his armour, and silently seated himself at Cæsar's feet to await his doom.

It is six years later. During all that time Vercingetorix has been languishing in a Roman dungeon, probably that black hole called the "Mamertine prison," where so many were done to death. His country has settled quietly down under the Roman yoke, which, indeed, has been arranged to weigh as little as possible! Cæsar, become master of the world, has returned to Rome, and Vercingetorix is dragged from his prison, loaded with chains, and made to follow the great man's chariot through the streets of the city.

And there is a last scene about which the Roman historians are silent, as well they may be. Only vague legends tell what was the actual fate of the patriot. According to some, he was strangled, others say he was beheaded. But whatever happened to his body, his soul

still lives in the hearts of the countrymen for whom he laid down his life two thousand years ago.

“ Et vous avez dressé debout, comme un menhir,
Au seuil de notre Histoire, ainsi qu’au seuil d’un temple,
Ce que tous vos lointains enfants viendront bénir :
Le granit immortel d’un magnanime exemple.”

ARSÈNE VERMENOUE

CHAPTER III

The Village of Gergovia—Roche-Blanche—Le Crest—Saint-Amand—Saint-Saturnin—Champeix and its Inn—Auvergnat Superstitions—Riom—Saint-Amable—The Black Virgin of Marsat and the Wheel of Wax—Tournœl—The Puy de Pariou

IF, instead of returning to Romagnat, you descend from the plateau on the farther side, you quickly find yourself looking down on the flat red roofs of a village, which still bears the name of Gergovia, and is probably built out of the remains of that famous six-foot wall, constructed of beams and stone, which so excited the admiration of the Romans, and formed so considerable an item in the fortification of the city of Vercingetorix. Like most of the villages in Auvergne, Gergovia has been built quite regardless of convenience, and is merely a collection of lava-walled cottages clinging to the steepest part of the southern slope of the mountain.

After scrambling down the narrow path, we found ourselves on the top of this village, the main street of which is on so steep an incline, that we felt as though we had entered some house by a trap-door, and were finding our way down the staircase through the various stories. First came very rough places, mostly used as sheds and haylofts. Presently we came to a chapel, and in front of it a fountain where women were washing, just as, no doubt, their ancestors did in Cæsar's time. On the lowest floor of all we found an inn, for which, by that time, we were quite ready!

Climbing up an outside flight of steps, we entered a large bare room, the blinds of which were so closely drawn that, after the glare without, it seemed twilight. One window, however, stood open, and on the little balcony beyond, an old man was sitting in the sunshine. I can see him now, turning his face with its merry eyes and serious mouth toward us.

"Bonjour, Monsieur-Madame!" he cries gaily, and then we see that he is a cripple, and sits there not because he is old, but because his legs are paralysed.

As soon as he has us seated comfortably beside him on his balcony, with some of Saint Verney's good white wine on a table at our elbow, he plunges eagerly into conversation, after the manner of the Auvergnat, who is a friendly, cheerful, expansive edition of his cousin the Breton. He tells of the accident which crippled him—how he was run over, ten years before, by a heavy waggon, and has grown more and more helpless, till now he cannot move at all. "But I have this balcony, you see," he concludes cheerfully, "where I can sit in the sunshine and watch the children playing below, and cast an eye from time to time over the landscape yonder, to see how the vines are getting on! Oh, it might be much worse, Madame!"

"How do you spend the time in winter?" I asked; "are you fond of reading?"

"I read *Le Petit Journal* when I can get it," he replied, "and that is most days, for the neighbours are very kind. Some one is often coming in for a chat, just to tell me how the world is moving. And then there is always Marie!"

"Marie is your wife?"

"Yes, Madame, my wife." Then with a shout which

nade me jump, "Marie! Encore du vin pour Monsieur! Ma foi! You forget he is English!"

"Pardon, Monsieur!" said a meek voice, as the little woman came forward out of the shadow, with the step of a mouse, and filled up our glasses.

"I suppose you do not have many English here?" asked my husband.

"They come sometimes. When was it, Marie, that the English came?"

"The year before last!"

"So it was!" agreed her husband; "how the time flies! I always remember them, for they sat at that table and drank two bottles of wine each, and then walked down the hill as steadily as two gendarmes. I watched them myself; not a stumble! Bon Dieu! What a nation!"

"Perhaps the gentlefolk know them," suggested Marie timidly, with that very common peasant idea of the smallness of all worlds outside their own. "Their name was Robinson; they were brothers!"

As we sat there watching the wide stretch of country, we naturally began talking of Vercingetorix, and, to my delight, I found the old man thoroughly well versed in all the legends connected with the hero.

I had read about him, as who has not; had even followed his campaign on the map, and pondered over it as I rested at the foot of his monument; but the dry bones of history came to life as we sat there in the sunshine, and the cripple told the story, in his convincing colloquial fashion.

There is nothing like hearing the legends of the old heroes and saints, related by the peasants amid the scenes of their long past struggles. These Celts of Auvergne are fond of talking and talk well. They have strong imagina-

tions, and they tell a story as though it had happened but yesterday, with little personal details thrown in, which add greatly to the charm and conviction of the whole narrative. No doubt the information so acquired is somewhat embroidered, less reliable than that gathered from books; but it sticks in the memory and lives, so that after a time the whole country seems peopled with historical personages, who come and go, walk by our side, tell us their joys and sorrows, and when later we go to their castles, their old churches and monasteries, we shall find them there before us, waiting to welcome us to the homes they once occupied.

"If I could only walk," said the landlord in conclusion, for the first time showing a touch of impatience at his infirmity, "I would take you all over the plateau, and explain how it happened, Madame."

About a mile from Gergovia is the curious village of Roche-Blanche, with its many-storied dwellings, excavated in the chalky cliff. It is one of the most beautiful walks I know, from Gergovia to Roche-Blanche. The path lies through vineyards, for we are still in the diocese of Saint Verney, and everywhere you see his worshippers tending the vines, with their little wooden casks hanging to their belts, their dogs keeping guard beside them, and the legs of their old white horses stained green with the copper of the dressing they use.

Roche-Blanche lies on a steep slope, leading upward toward the great chalky cliff under which the town nestles. The original village was burrowed in this cliff, like a rabbit warren, and no doubt dates back to quite prehistoric times, though the caves have been enlarged and added to, as man became more and more adept in the art of excavation. Later, the inhabitants deserted these dens for houses built



THE LAST INHABITANT OF THE ROCK HOUSES OF LA ROCHE-BLANCHE

against the base of the cliff, and now, still lower down the slope, there has grown up around the church a comparatively modern town. The whole forms a most picturesque example of the evolution of the dwelling-house; the elaborate caves above, hollowed out story above story, their entrances raised many feet above the ground, for purposes of fortification; the cottages immediately below, their back walls formed by the cliff against which they rest; and at the foot of these, the modern town, with its white stone walls and red-tiled roofs, the church rising in the midst. It is all so crowded into the curious, saucer-like hollow beneath the hillside, that the streets are mere narrow stairways, carpeted with straw and litter, where chickens feed and pigs and goats wander, while the women gather in groups in the shade, gossiping as they work at their embroidery and lace-making.

Beyond Roche-Blanche is Le Crest, well named from the position it occupies on its lofty hill-top. I remember that walk so well! We were anxious about the path, and inquired of a woman who was talking at a doorway at Roche-Blanche.

"Madame wishes to go through Le Crest to Saint-Amand?" she asked eagerly. "I myself am for Saint-Amand. If the gentlefolk permit, we will walk together, and I will show them a short cut."

Of course I asked nothing better, and we wandered on, chatting gaily, at least she chatted and I listened gaily.

It appeared that she had been over to Roche-Blanche to see her sister, and was now on her way back to Saint-Saturnin, a village just beyond Saint-Amand, where she had left her baby in her mother's charge.

"It is the first time that I have been parted from him," she explained, "and I am in haste to see him once more!"

How she talked! In a few moments I knew all her history, her simple peasant history, the record of the little things which made up the sum of her life.

"Picture to yourself, Madame," she exclaimed; "I found myself forty-five and no child! I had married late, and my first baby died. Ah, what sorrow that was! And the years were passing; at forty-five one is already old, even in Auvergne," and, as she spoke, I thought of the lady mentioned by Fléchier, who told him that "the women of Auvergne had children later than the women of other lands, just as the Day of Judgment would not come to the Auvergnats till it had passed over all the rest of the world."

"Then one day," continued the woman, "Maman, who had seen me fretting, said to me: 'Philomène, why not go to Notre Dame du Port, and ask her to send you a little one in the place of her you have lost?' Madame knows Notre Dame du Port?" she asked suddenly, breaking off in her narrative.

I shook my head. "Not yet," I replied, "but I hope to make her acquaintance soon."

It was said lightly, but the serious face of the woman warned me in time.

"Do so, Madame! Our Lady of the Port is the greatest saint in the world. Ah, what do I not owe her! I, who had given up all hope; and now, voilà, un beau garçon!" and her elderly wrinkled face beamed, and grew young again at the thought of her happiness.

"How old is your son?" I asked.

"Four months, but he is like a child of a year, so strong, so intelligent."

"And you have never been parted before? What time did you leave Saint-Saturnin?" I asked, hoping from my

heart that no accident had occurred to this more than Samuel.

"About two hours ago!"

"Two hours? But you must have run all the way! Why, it would take any other woman four!"

"Not if she had a baby like mine waiting for her! Ah, he puts wings on my feet, the little angel!"

The name of the prodigy, it appeared, was "Francick," "Un joli nom, n'est-ce pas? C'est le même que François. J'ai un cousin qui s'appelle François."

I asked if her husband was not pleased about the baby.

"Oh, oui, assurément. Et Maman! Elle est contente! contente!" She paused, then added naively with a smile, "Mais c'est moi surtout!"

For a moment she remained silent, her eyes gazing away over the hills to where her home lay, and I saw her lips move as though she were murmuring an endearment to the still distant baby.

The little commonplace story moved me strangely, recalling as it did so many of the legends told by old Jacques Branche of the birth of his favourite saints. I wondered whether this long-desired and miraculously given son would turn out some famous teacher or reformer, like Géraud or Nectaire, and, in spite of his humble origin, raise himself to be a buttress to support the failing fortunes of his Church.

Presently my companion roused herself and returned to the subject of Notre Dame du Port.

She told me the story of the statue being saved from destruction in the days of the Terror.

"It is indeed fortunate that our Blessed Virgin escaped!" said she; "what would all the country do without her?"

"There are many miracles at her shrine?"

"Dame, oui! Why, only last year there was Elise Lescure of Champeix, who had not walked for ten years. Ten years, Madame! And she was moreover seventy years of age!"

"And she was cured?"

"Yes, she might no doubt have been cured before, but she had been averse to making the pilgrimage. 'I am too old!' she would say, 'and then again, how can I go with both my legs paralysed?' But her friends persisted. 'Go with us!' said they, 'you shall take the diligence.'"

"And she went?"

"Madame, I was there when she entered the crypt. It was pitiful. She was carried by two of her neighbours, who set her down at the foot of the staircase. The Mass began. I forgot Elise, for I was praying for myself, as I have already related. Just when Monsieur le Curé reached the place where it says: 'Miracle!'—Madame remembers?"—I nodded sagely, without having, however, the slightest idea to what she referred—"there was a loud, a frightful cry. You would have said it came from one possessed. Every one rushed toward Elise, and found her lying as one dead. For nearly an hour she remained thus, and when she recovered, lo! she had the use of her limbs once more, and now works as well as ever she did in her young days."

"Wonderful!" said my husband, who had been listening, "do you have many such cases?"

"Not every day, Monsieur. You see one must have faith, and in these days so many have none. You find people who do not believe in God, or heaven, or even the Blessed Virgin! They think that the rain and sunshine come by chance! Ah, it is terrible, how I pity them! For me it is easy to believe, but then, to be sure, in my own family,

have we not had proof! There was my own grandmother who had saved the Blessed Virgin of Cornac, at the time when all the saints were being burned. A year or so later, she was crossing the river in a boat with her father, when the wind caught it and they were in great danger. 'Oh, Sainte Vierge!' she cried, 'I saved you from fire: save me now from the water!' In a moment, Madame, the boat was safely beside the bank! After that it is not difficult to believe in the Blessed Virgin."

Here she stopped for a moment to take breath, and looked inquiringly at my husband. "Monsieur is perhaps not interested in such things. It is the women above all who need religion."

"Indeed," said I, "all this interests him very much. You see he is a doctor."

Instantly her face changed, and she dropped her voice to that respectful awed tone, which the peasant of Auvergne apparently always thinks it prudent to assume when in the presence of the faculty. She still talked, but now all her attention centred round the mysterious Medicine Man whom it was so desirable to propitiate. "Does the gentleman not grow tired of travelling?" she inquired; "can he eat the food of Auvergne? How does he like the wine? Does he think the children as healthy as in England?" And so on, but always in a stealthy whisper addressed to me, with a furtive glance at my companion.

We had been climbing the slope which leads from the upland valley to the rounded hill, on whose top Le Crest fits like a skull-cap, one ruined tower all that remains of the castle of the famous house of Roche Aymon. As we turned for a moment to glance at the way we had come, we caught a view of the Puy de Dôme. A light cloud, which had been floating by, had rested for a moment on its summit.

"He's putting on his nightcap!" said my husband.

But the woman whispered to me as she turned away :
"Say nothing! It will rain before night. As the shepherds tell us in these parts—

"Si le Puy met son chapeau,
Il faut prendre un manteau
Car il y aura de l'eau!"

Like all peasants, nature was for her full of significance. As Eliphas Lévi says, "every natural object seeming but a hieroglyphic to express some inward truth." Did a cuckoo sound his note, instantly her hand went into her pocket. "If you have money in your pocket when you hear the cuckoo, you will have some all the year!" she exclaimed. She told me that there had been a great hay harvest, which I had noticed for myself, but that the grapes were bad, indeed everything else was bad, would be bad, adding, "année de foin, année de rien!" which of course means that to get a good crop of hay so much rain is necessary that everything else will be spoiled.

As we were passing the castle, a bat flew out and circled round my head, at which she shuddered and crossed herself.

"C'est la Mort qui cherche quelqu'un!" she observed. "Fermez les yeux, Madame, fermez les yeux, he will very likely faire tomber quelque chose, and that will blind you."

She told me that the moon sailing the wrong side up meant bad weather, which I think must be an old Celtic saying, for I have heard it in several places.

"Année de noisettes, année de filles!" she remarked, as we passed a little nut wood on our way down. "Never did I see so many nuts as the year my little girl was born.



THE VILLAGE OF LA ROCHE-BLANCHE FROM LE CREST

And now this year, when it is a boy, there are scarcely any."

Saint-Amand is hardly worth a visit, so thoroughly has it been restored ; but the little village of Saint-Saturnin, about a mile farther on, is a marvel of picturesqueness, still surmounted by its castle and surrounded by its fortifications. After passing through the old gateway, the road goes steeply up, past the church into the Place, once the courtyard of the castle, which still forms one side of it. If you are so fortunate as to meet Monsieur le Recteur, as we did, coming to fetch water for lunch from the beautiful fountain, which still supplies the wants of the little town, he will probably invite you into the castle, now used as the Presbytery, and from its windows you will find yourself looking down into one of those sudden ravines which cleave the highlands of Auvergne, as surprisingly as the sword of Roland cleft the mountains of the Cirque de Gavarnie.

Monsieur le Recteur was a very agreeable man, proud of his church and village, too proud perhaps, for it is largely owing to his energy that the fine twelfth-century building has been renovated, and, from a picturesque point of view, entirely ruined. However, it no doubt serves its true purpose as a place of worship the better for the restoration, so we must not complain ; only it is sad to find the splendid capitals retouched, sometimes even replaced ; sadder still to miss the familiar statues of the patron saints. So far as I remember, even Saint Saturnin has disappeared. It is difficult to say what precise connexion the village had with the first Bishop of Toulouse : perhaps his friend Saint Austremoine named it in memory of him, when he came out from Clermont on one of his episcopal visits.

The castle, now occupied by Monsieur le Recteur, was formerly in the family of La Tour d'Auvergne, from which it passed to that of Rochechouart, and later to the Lords de Broglie, who owned it up to the time of the French Revolution.

It is impossible to speak of all the charming villages which lie hidden in the folds of the mountains round Clermont—their name is legion! There is Champeix, easily reached by one of the motor-buses which start from the Place de Jaude. We found it a hot ride, but we had taken a great bag of cherries, which we shared with a dear old priest, who in return told us stories about the country as we passed along.

At Champeix we found an old-fashioned inn where we lunched at an upper window, overlooking the sleepy market-place. The landlady, finding we were English, made special efforts to entertain us suitably, getting out all her best table service, and cooking us a grilled steak, which, to tell the truth, would have been decidedly better minced or stewed. It appeared that for ten years she had lived in England as maid, in the family of Lady D—, and had been so happy there that all English people were for her, in a measure, sacred! After calling our attention to the cruets and various other plated goods, which she proudly proclaimed "Engleech," adding that her "lady" had given them to her on her marriage, she produced with much pride a large album, which contained, indeed, a wonderful collection. She must evidently have travelled with her mistress, for there were postcards she had collected from all kinds of places, both foreign and English. There were views, too, of noble country-houses, and photographs of noted leaders of English society, portraits of her mistress in various court dresses and ball dresses, pictures of the

Royal Family, snapshots taken at race-meetings, and on board well-known yachts.

But what interested me most of all was to find, scattered among these gay and fashionable mementoes, certain humble birthday cards carefully preserved and treasured: "Bonne et joyeuse fête, chère bien aimée!" or, "Mon cœur est à vous pour toujours, je ne vous abandonnerai jamais! Celui qui vous aime si bien. J. B." Sometimes it would be a floral tribute, with the meanings of the various flowers carefully written below:—"Violette, Espérance," "Rose et Myosotis, Bonheur"—but always in the same peasant writing, telling of a hard rough hand, and difficulty with the spelling. Some bore distant postmarks, showing that "J. B." "faisait son congé," while his "chère bien aimée" was leading her gay life in London or Monte Carlo. As I looked at the poor little cards, I thought of the amusement their arrival must have created among her fellow-servants. She had evidently been the favourite maid of her beautiful young mistress, had dressed her for her first drawing-room, for her marriage, as the pictures testified. She could probably have taken her choice among the lordly footmen or smart young grooms she was constantly meeting, for she must have been a very pretty girl, and attractive, as the women are in Auvergne. But she never forgot that somewhere at home, "J. B." was waiting for her, "son cœur à elle pour toujours!" Besides, though the Auvergnat is fond of "emigrating" and seeing the world, he always returns sooner or later to his native country, bringing with him the little fortune he has managed to lay by during his sojourn in the "land of the stranger." "J. B." well knew she would return when he consented to his pretty fiancée adventuring herself in foreign parts. But I dare say that, more than once during those long ten

years, his faithful heart misgave him, when she wrote of all the attentions she was receiving, and he pictured the dull hard-working life, which was all he had to offer her!

I had just turned from a portrait of Lord and Lady D——, taken in company with some royal personage, to that of a plain young conscript with a round Celtic head and earnest faithful eyes, when, chancing to look up, I found the same eyes gazing down at me. There could be no doubt about their identity, though ten years must have passed since the photograph was taken, and the face and figure had broadened and aged. It was "J. B.," but with a twinkle in his eye, and a settled contentment about his mouth, which showed that he was well satisfied with the reward of his patience.

"Do *you* know England?" I asked.

"No, Madame!" as though I had inquired whether he knew Paradise; "*c'est ma femme qui a été en Angleterre.*"

After lunch, we climbed the hill to the site of the castle, and found the chapel still intact, though unfortunately locked. Turning away, I noticed two elderly white-capped women, seated on the grassy slope outside the gate. They had evidently been watching us, but averted their eyes, and went on hurriedly with their lace-work, as they saw themselves observed, and when I asked whether they could tell us where to find the key, professed to be quite startled at seeing strangers in that quiet spot. In the most polite and dignified manner, they invited us to be seated, and it would have been difficult to find a more beautiful and luxurious resting-place. The summit of the hill was so small that it must have puzzled the ancient architect to find room for both castle and chapel. But he managed to squeeze them in, by putting the wall at the very edge of the steep slope, so that, as I sat beneath the



THE CASTLE OF CHAMPEIX

ruined gateway, I looked straight down into Champeix, and could watch all the life of the place going on below.

The women, it appeared, had come up for a breath of fresh air. "I said to my friend," explained the younger, "how foolish we are to sit in our houses when we might be up there in the sunshine!" As they worked away, they began telling me about their lives. It appears that they get seven sous for the edging of a tablecloth, and, as it takes about three hours to fix on the braid, and four hours to finish, it works out at a halfpenny an hour! Fortunately these particular women were not entirely dependent on their earnings, but worked, as they explained, to "fill up their odd time!"

They told me that the Chapel of Saint Michel on the rock was formerly a very sacred place, and the elder said that in her young days the curé of Champeix said Mass there every week.

She added with a touch of bitterness: "But what will you! It is the same everywhere. For religion, it is finished!" She went on to speak of a place near by, called, I think, "Loshes," where "the grass was green and soft as satin, and the trees gave a pleasant shade in summer," and where formerly there was a splendid procession at the Fête of Saint Jean, and two fires, the first, that of the bracken, more smoke than flame, through which the cattle were driven, and next day the great fire, the charred branches of which were hung in the chimney to preserve from lightning. "But it is all over!" she added with a sigh. "Our young people think no longer of anything but how to amuse themselves."

The younger woman was more optimistic, and presently suggested the possibility of finding the key of the chapel. But her companion had by this time become so despondent

with regard to anything, even remotely connected with religion, that she declared it was quite hopeless, as the bell-ringer had assuredly gone out haymaking. So we abandoned the idea, and, to cheer her, I asked whether they did not find the auto-bus to Clermont very convenient! But it was an unfortunate remark! Every species of automobile terrified her! They were an invention of the Evil One, and, as for Monsieur le Directeur, who they said made so much money by them, everyone knew he had "la poulette" and had signed away his soul to the devil! But there, it was all part of the changes that were coming over the world! Look at the vines spoiled by the cold! Who could say it was not a judgment of Heaven! And the young people, no longer content to live as their grandmothers had done: they must have change, diversion! Donkey-carts were no longer quick enough, they wanted bicyclettes, auto-buses! Bah! she had no patience with them! And she glanced down at two gaily dressed girls, who were laughing together in the market-place below, with a look so dark that it made me think of an ancient witch casting her evil eye upon them!

And indeed the fancy is not so far-fetched as you may think. It is perhaps true that Champeix is too near the centre of civilization for such superstitions to be common. But away in Cantal and Corrèze we shall still find them rampant as they were in the Middle Ages. For this Auvergne is almost virgin ground, so far as education and progress are concerned. Few of the people can read or write a year after they have left school! They believe in the statues of their saints, as their forefathers believed in the idols which preceded them. The cult of the forests, the stones and the fountains, remains as popular as ever; and as for evil spirits, witches, fairies, and other supernatural

agencies, the land is as full of them as Israel was, before the days of Saul.

There is the "Loup Garou," the "Were Wolf," a terrible beast is he! "Were Wolves" derive their origin from *ninth* sons, hence their frequency in Auvergne, where large families are the rule. He always has some special mark upon him, a fleur-de-lys or broad arrow, and at nightfall it is his custom to hasten off to some secret place, where he changes his form to that of a wolf. Then till daybreak he rushes about the country, worrying sheep, killing cattle and even men. For seven years the "Were Wolf" continues his evil practices, and if during that time he is wounded, he becomes an actual wolf till the day of his death.¹ I have somewhere read the story of a "Were Wolf" whose young wife, suspecting from his frequent absences from home that all was not as it should be, followed him, saw him change into his uncanny costume, and the next day had the boldness to go and steal his furs. But it brought her no luck. With or without his skin, the man was a "Were Wolf," and was finally hunted down and torn to pieces by his own dogs.

And the "Drac" or Draco! He it is, wicked little demon, with fluid diaphanous body, who, after sleeping all day in the woods or beside the fountains, creeps at nightfall into the stables, and unfastening the horses, rides them furiously all over the country, so that in the morning they are found trembling and covered with foam. There is no end to the tales told of the doings of this "Drac," who is only too common among the desolate mountain villages of Cantal.¹

¹ It appears that the only hope of circumventing this troublesome "Drac" is to search for the hole by which he enters, and just before it to place a dish of millet seed. This he stumbles over, spilling the seed, which he is obliged to pick up to the last grain, before he can proceed to his evil practices.

And there are the "Fades" or fairies, own sisters of the other Celtic fairies whom we find in Brittany, Wales, and Ireland. And the "Chevauche Vieille," a monster who settles on the chests of old people as they lie asleep, and tries to suffocate them. And there are others—but the most feared of all is the Evil Eye!

On our return to the hotel at Champeix, we found that the landlady had brewed some tea for us in a magnificent English-plated teapot, of stupendous proportions, part of the celebrated wedding present; and while we were sipping, and waiting for the "Machine Diabolique" to start, I asked her if she ever regretted England, or found it difficult to settle down again to her quiet country life. For a moment she looked at me in puzzled surprise, then, "Mais non, Madame, pas du tout! It is true that England is beautiful, beautiful, and rich. . . . Mon Dieu! yes, that is true also! And my lady was an angel from heaven, if ever there was one. But on the other hand Auvergne is my native country. There is no land so sweet as that which gives us birth. And besides," she looked down, and twisted her wedding ring, "there was always Jean waiting for me!"

It happened that "J. B.," having business on the road, travelled part of the way back with us. But as soon as he was deprived of his wife's support, he became so taciturn that I found it impossible to draw him out, and left him to the driver, with whom he held a lively discussion in patois till he reached his destination.

Some fifteen kilometres to the north of Clermont is the city of Riom, capital of the Duchy of Auvergne till Catherine de Medicis cast a favouring eye on Clermont,

and declared the two towns equal in importance. Ever since then, a deadly jealousy has existed between Riom and her southern sister, giving rise to quarrels which, during several centuries, constituted the chief events of that part of Auvergne. All manner of legends have been invented to account for this vendetta, some authors even going the length of asserting that the Riomois are descended from the son of "a certain Greek king of the Island of Rhions," just as the rest of the Auvergnats claim the Trojans as ancestors, and that the present feud is merely the aftermath of that little difference of opinion which occurred about 1500 B.C.

It was nevertheless a bishop of the rival Clermont, Etienne VI., who gave Riom its chief glory, the beautiful church of Saint Amable. The Bishop had angered the Count of Auvergne, who came and besieged him while he was on an episcopal visit to Riom. Finding himself in danger, the prelate called upon the patron saint of the district, promising to raise a church in his honour if he would but interfere. Saint Amable must have heard the cry, for the Count retired discomfited, and the church arose forthwith.

It is this very Saint Amable round whom, until recent years, gathered most of the traditions of Riom. He was a native of this town, much beloved during life, and after death revered like some old Celtic chief. There was scarcely a public function in which his body was not called upon to take part. Was there a fire to be extinguished, a prince or duke to be welcomed, an epidemic to be quelled, some great townsman to be married or buried, the reliquary of Saint Amable borne by Les Porte-Chasse, clad all in white, was taken solemnly in procession round the town. There were in addition his regular festivals, which indeed

are still held. In fact this Saint Amable has always been the popular hero of Riom. He was credited with extraordinary powers over serpents and other noxious beasts, and it is said that even to-day no snake ever comes within the bounds of the parish. I have read somewhere a curious story of a serpent-charmer, who brought some vipers into the town, and was about to exhibit them, when, just as he had opened the box in which they lay coiled, an old man was seen approaching. Instantly the snakes glided out, and made off as fast as they could in all directions. According to Riom belief, the old man was Amable, who, it is averred, has more than once appeared in this guise. On one occasion a servant who had stolen wine from a cellar near the church, found himself in the clutches of this mysterious old personage, and was beaten till he was covered with blood, but on confessing his fault he was immediately healed. Such is the saint whom the people of Riom glory in proclaiming as their patron.

But the most striking thing concerning Amable is his connection with the worship of the sun. Several of his legends seem to suggest that he must have superseded some Gaulish Apollo once adored in the neighbourhood. For instance, it is said that one day in church, having occasion to remove his cloak and gloves, he was looking round in uncertainty, not knowing where to put them. Suddenly a sunbeam shot through the window, and the saint, in no way surprised, immediately hung his garments upon it, where they remained till he needed them again.

It was down this same sunbeam that an angel came another day, bearing a large box of relics for Saint Amable.

But the most convincing proof of the connection between Amable and the god of the sunshine, is to be seen at his festival on the eleventh of June. In front of his reliquary

is borne a huge wheel, which, as the procession passes along the roads, is turned incessantly. To-day it is of flowers, but formerly it was made of iron, and on it was wound a wax candle weighing twenty-two pounds, so fine drawn that it was supposed to be long enough to reach from Riom to the village of Marsat, the goal of the pilgrimage. Arrived there, the giant candle was placed on a very ancient stone at the entrance to the village, and offered to the Black Virgin, which may still be seen queening it over the altar of the church. The statue itself has probably replaced that of some goddess of the waters, for the very name MAR-SA signifies a course of water. It was one evening that I visited the ancient church of Marsat, and already too dark to see distinctly the face of the dusky statue. But I made out the old iron wheel on which the wax used to be carried, hanging from the roof just before the altar.

At the door of the Church of Saint Mathuret at Riom there is another statue of the Virgin much revered by the good people of the town. LA VIERGE À L'OISEAU it is called, and if you inquire concerning it, you will be told that it was carved by a prisoner condemned to death for some crime of which he was guiltless. He was a stone mason, and finding himself unable to convince his judges of his innocence, he put his trust in the Virgin. "Give me forty days," said he. "In that time I will carve you a statue of La Bonne Dame. If, when she is finished, she smiles, you will know that I am innocent."

The judges, good simple souls, were satisfied, and there smiling at her little Son, still stands La Vierge à l'Oiseau. The gayest stories of Riom are those belonging to the end of the fourteenth century, when Pierre de Bourbon, and his royal wife, Anne de France, were living there. That

was the time when, in the castle of Tournœl on the hill above the city, dwelt that gay and naughty lady, Catherine de Talaru, of whom you may read so many entertaining things in Monsieur Gomot's book on the history of Tournœl. She was a young widow and a great beauty, and held such a scandalous court up in the old castle, that at last she was called to account by the "bailliage de Montferrand," who denounced her as a "Circe, a Melusine, a witch, and a sorceress."

Of all the excursions around Clermont, the most wonderful is that to the Puy de Pariou. The volcano lies at about three miles distant from La Baraque, the little wayside station on the route to the Puy de Dôme.

It is the strangest walk imaginable, a broad track leading over hollow-sounding peat bogs, and beds of ancient ashes, hemmed in on either hand by towering billows of lava, petrified in mid-career—not a tree, not a bush, scarcely a flower, a haunted waste of blackened earth, scantily clothed by a ghostly covering of pallid, scorched, unwholesome-looking grass!

Directly we left the lane leading from La Baraque into this wilderness, we were conscious of a distinct change of atmosphere. The sun, while doubling his heat-giving power, seemed to have lost most of his cheerful radiance, so that, in spite of its being mid-summer, the land was dark and sinister, a dead land, exhaling a hot acrid perfume, which I never remember to have noticed elsewhere. The silence too was startling. Even our feet made no sound, save a hollow rumble, as though we were walking over vaults, and the utter solitude was but intensified by the mysterious grass-grown tracks, which led from various points toward the mountain. As we trudged on over the flat deserted waste, we gradually forgot the fruitful smil-

ing plain we had so lately left ; the cheerful bustling world of men and women—we had entered the Land of the Volcanoes ! There they were, frowning down upon us, a mighty formidable group, and foremost of all, standing alone like an advance guard, was Pariou. The monotony of the place was so complete, that, keeping our eyes fixed upon the mountain, it seemed as though *we* were standing motionless, and the huge cone advancing, bearing down upon us, and all the while the sun shone with the strange lurid light of a flaming furnace. The flatness continued to the very foot of the mountain, for Pariou rises from the peat bog like a sugar-loaf from a table. One moment we were still walking on level ground with the great cone looming above us, the next we were scrambling and swarming up its steep side, through the thick mass of scrub which clothes it almost to the summit. This undergrowth was most annoying, high enough to make progress difficult, and too low to afford any shelter from the sun, which blazed down, for all the world as though the volcano above were still in eruption. For a while I struggled gallantly, leaving bits of my garments hanging like votive rags to the bushes. At last, sinking forward against the steep slope, I gasped out that I could go no further. My husband, partly owing to his more rational costume, had by this time reached the summit, which, to tell the truth, was not very far distant.

“Come along !” cried he cheerfully, “you’re nearly at the top !”

“But is it the top ?” I asked suspiciously, remembering many disappointments experienced on mountain climbs. I saw him nod, so I rose and stumbled on again a few steps.

“I can’t ! It’s impossible !” I panted, “I must give it up !” But down came the voice. “You’ll be sorry all your life if you do !”

"Is it so *very* wonderful?"

This time the head nodded up and down like a mandarin's! So one more effort, and, just as I stop and begin sliding down again, a hand stretched out, a final scramble, and I find myself on a narrow rim of soft green turf, stretching away, and meeting again in a huge circle, and within its arms the crater of Pariou. Imagine an empty egg-shell, a quarter of a mile across and three hundred feet deep, smooth as though it had been turned on a lathe, and clothed with a perfectly fitting covering of fine velvet grass. Round and round this cup, from top to bottom, winds a narrow, close, spiral path, worn by generations of the ancestors of those cows who are just now feeding in single file on the farther side of the rim. Nearer at hand is a woman who sits knitting, while her little boy and two rough-looking dogs keep guard over the cattle. The contrast between this peaceful pastoral group, and the wild and terrifying picture which rises in my mind, of what the crater must once have been, forms one of the most striking memories of Auvergne.

The woman told me that, even in the coldest winter, snow never lies at the bottom of the crater, which is always warm and green. The cows belonged to the village, and every day she brought them up here to feed. She might, she said, have earned more, either by working in the fields or going down to Royat as a washerwoman. "But it is so beautiful up here, the sunshine is better than gold!" she added, with a touch of the Pantheism usual in the Celtic peasant.

As we sat there, she pointed out to me the other craters, naming them, in her curious patois. And all the time beside us, rose the great form of the Puy de Dôme, no longer grim and forbidding, but delicately beautiful,

revealing himself through a pale turquoise mist in all his shining splendour.

As we rose to go, I hesitated. The outer side of the mountain looked so steep and rough, after the smooth green crater.

"Take your time, Madame!" said the woman encouragingly, "take your time, pick up your skirt, and you will get down!"

I have done so! Already the Pariou lies behind us, the cows, on the skyline, growing small as ants, the sound of their bells fainter, and the great Puy de Dôme has once more shrouded himself in his wrappings. But I know him now as he is, for he has shown himself to me, as he will to anyone who, like myself, struggles to the top of Pariou, to offer a sacrifice of admiration and wonder to his golden majesty.

CHAPTER IV

Clermont—The Coming of Saint Austremonne—The Church of Notre Dame du Port—The Preaching of the First Crusade—The Black Virgin of Clermont—The Revolution at Clermont—The Sacred Well — Sidonius Apollinaris — The Cathedral — Blaise Pascal — Ferrand

SURELY Fléchier did the city of Clermont an injustice when he wrote of it in the seventeenth century, "There is scarcely a town in France more disagreeable!" He goes on to assert that the situation is inconvenient, at the very foot of the mountains; that the streets are so narrow that even the broadest is scarcely the width of a single carriage, and that, in consequence, "the drivers of Clermont have become more accomplished in the art of swearing than those of any other city!"

It is true that the streets are narrow, winding, and steep. They have been so ever since Bishop Stephen of Auvergne, anxious to repeople the city devastated by the Normans in 940, gave permission for anyone to come and set up a house, where and how he would. But to an artist the maze-like irregularity is charming, infinitely picturesque; the old streets and forgotten squares full of rich southern lights and shadows, the whole reminiscent of the saints and heroes who once trod them.

I shall never forget the day when I first saw Clermont, its cathedral standing out clear, purple, and alert against the dreamy background of mountains, the red roofs of the sleeping town (it was early morning) clustering at its base.

Approaching from the same direction as Fléchier did, two hundred years ago, its "inconvenience" never struck me at all. Instead, I realized in a moment, why the great Roman Emperor Augustus chose this unparalleled site on which to build his favourite city of Augusto Nemetum. It is, as Guy de Maupassant has said—"Le pays le plus séduisant, le plus doux, le plus reposant que j'ai jamais vu."

It is said that in the days of the Roman conquest, the plain was still covered with forest, from the midst of which rose the hill Naomh-ait or the "sacred place," so called because here the Druids had their mysterious seat. No one can tell exactly where this worshipping place was situated, but is it not probable that the sacred oak which formed its centre grew near the fountain which to-day bubbles before the subterranean altar of Notre Dame du Port, and that the much-disputed name "Port" or "haven" dates back to the days when this spot was a Druidic shrine, with right of sanctuary for any criminal who sought it? Indeed I would go so far as to suggest that the tiny black statue of Notre Dame du Port may possibly have been carved from the heart of the ancient oak-tree, beneath whose branches Druidic sacrifices were once offered, and where, it is said, the hero Vercingetorix first learned his impending fate from the prophecies of the Arch-Druid.

After the conquest of the Celts, the Romans, following their usual practice, destroyed Gergovia, the old capital of Auvergne, and built a new city at Naomh-ait. This Augusto Nementum, as it was called, quickly became celebrated for its splendour and learning. It was a place of palaces and temples, while above it on the Puy de Dôme was raised an enormous statue of gilded bronze, representing the god Mercury, set there to protect the

town from storms, such as still rush down from mountain.

It was toward the gate of this sumptuous city, that there came one evening a poor weary-looking foreigner. He had travelled on foot from the town of Lezoux, to-day Château-Laudun, where he had made himself notorious by his destruction of the false gods in the Temple of Apollo.¹ As he approached Nemetum, he gazed with wonder and sorrow at the temples which rose on every hill-top. A rich citizen, who was passing, stopped to ask him his business. "I have come to preach a new religion!" said Austremoine, "a religion which necessitates the giving up of all such earthly pleasure and magnificence as I see around me, for a life of penitence and mortification." "How extraordinary!" remarked the gentleman, "and you really expect people to adopt such a poor religion as that? Look at our temples, our splendid and ancient ritual, our civilization, education and philosophy!" "Nevertheless," said Austremoine quietly, but with a gleam in his earnest dark eyes, "I shall convert this city to my despised

¹ The legend says, that on arriving in Auvergne, Austremoine did not go straight to Clermont, but took up his abode in the house of a widow named Claude, at Château-Laudun. Here he passed his nights in prayer, and his days in catechizing and preaching, and was altogether so indefatigable that, as Père Branche expresses it, in his quaint sixteenth-century French: "Il donna une si grande épouvante aux Démons qui estoient adorez dans le Temple d'Apollon qu'ils brisoient leurs Idoles et sortoient parmy l'air visiblement, crians et hurlans avecque mille plaintes." Thereupon the priests of the temple roused the people against Austremoine, and it would have gone hardly with him, had not the Almighty sent a timely earthquake which wrecked the temple and killed a number of those who were tormenting the missionary. This convulsion of nature answered a double purpose, for beside frightening the priests who were the ringleaders of the riot, it provided Austremoine with dead bodies on which to exercise his skill as a miracle-worker, and so established his reputation as a saint or demi-god.

It was after this startling commencement to his mission that he continued his journey toward the capital of the district.

religion, and I believe that shortly in all Auvergne there will not remain one head which does not bow before the Cross of Christ!" "Poor fool!" murmured the gentleman pityingly, "why, I have heard of this Christ. He was crucified some fifty years ago, was He not, by one of our Proconsuls, for making a disturbance in Judæa? If all our criminals are to be deified like this, we shall have enough temples and to spare." And he strolled on.

The legend is given by Mosnier in his "Lives of the Saints of Auvergne," and he adds significantly: "Eighteen hundred years have passed since then, and the gorgeous city of Nemetum has been sacked ten times. But the Cross which Austremoine planted, still remains. It has seen generations disappear, centuries pass away, emperors flourish and fade, and still it shines over the ruins of the past with a lustre which nothing can dim."

It is not known where Austremoine first "set up his Cross!" He probably built a humble oratory on the spot where, later, Saint Namace raised the basilica of Saint Aleyre, spoken of by Gregory of Tours, and there are traces of another cell in the rock beneath the church at Royat. But it was surely not long before the great apostle of Auvergne made his way to the sacred Fountain of the Haven. When, five hundred years later, Saint Avit, Bishop of Clermont, built the chapel, now the crypt of Notre Dame du Port, he found traces of an earlier building, which may have been pagan, or on the other hand the ruin of a Christian structure, set up by Austremoine. Among the stones was discovered the little black image, which still after fourteen hundred years is one of the most venerated statues in France.

In our days, the church, which has risen above the crypt, is so hemmed in by buildings, that it is quite difficult

to find the iron gateway leading down to the ancient sculptured portal. But in Avit's century, the spot was still surrounded by forest, and later, when the trees disappeared, an enormous open space was left, now represented by the Place Delille. This was, no doubt, the extent of the ancient Druid sanctuary, and it was here that all the dukes, counts, barons, and knights of France assembled in 1095 to hear Pope Urban the Second proclaim the First Crusade.

It had been intended to hold this meeting at Le Puy in Velay, but so overwhelming was the response to the appeal of the bishops, that the Council found it necessary to transfer it to a larger town, and Clermont was selected.

We can almost see the earnest faces of the crowd listening to the impassioned words of Peter the Hermit, as he speaks, with burning eloquence, of the outrages offered to the Christians in the East, and tells of the profanation of the sacred tomb of Christ. As he ceases, a great silence falls over the multitude, till the Pope, in a voice broken by emotion, makes his well-known appeal to the people of France.

"Arm yourselves!" he cries, "my dear sons! Arm yourselves with the zeal of God, march to the help of your brethren, and the Lord Almighty will be with you!"

The first to offer himself was the Bishop of Le Puy, who, casting himself at the feet of the Pope, begged humbly to be decorated with the Red Cross. And at the sight, from the great assembly rose the cry: "Dieu le veult! Dieu le veult!"

Then all the nobles hastened to the adjoining crypt of Notre Dame du Port, to consecrate their lances and swords to the service of God, before the miraculous statue of the Black Virgin.



THE ENTRANCE TO NOTRE DAME DU PORT

But let us enter and see her for ourselves.

The church of Notre Dame du Port is the earliest example of that curious and interesting style of architecture called Roman-Auvergnat. It was built in the tenth century over the original church of Saint Avit, partially destroyed by the Normans.

It was a grey morning, when, having passed the group of cripples at the door, I first crossed the threshold of Notre Dame du Port, and found myself in the pillared dusk of the nave. The light was just sufficient to show the stilted arches and grotesque carvings on the capitals. What a sense of humour these old monks had! Look at the expression of Adam, as he is dragged out of Paradise by the beard! Eve has fallen, physically as well as spiritually, and is being trampled on by her husband in quite an orthodox fashion! Yet how grand the building is! Its sturdy, thick-set pillars and vaulted roof seem as eternal as the Church which created them. On either side of the entrance to the chancel is a staircase, leading down into the crypt. As we grow accustomed to the gloom, we become aware of a radiance streaming from below, and, stumbling through the chairs, make our way thither. On the halfway landing, where the stairways meet, a stout comely sister sits presiding over a mighty stack of candles of every size and price, and below, in the crypt, we can see pilgrims praying at the shrine of Our Lady of the Port. After the gloom of the church above, the sanctuary is dazzling, by reason of the crowds of votive candles left by the faithful. It is a wonderful place, a shrine of the Middle Ages; the walls covered with votive tablets, the pillars hung with offerings. Yet one has eyes for nothing, save the mysterious black "goddess," who sits enthroned above the altar, as she has sat for the last

1400 years. The curious ecclesiastical atmosphere of the place, and the scent of the flowers and burning wax gradually hypnotized me, till I found myself back in the days of Saint Avit, eighteenth Bishop of Clermont, and spiritual father of Gregory of Tours, from whose pen we have the saint's history. It was at the end of Avit's long life that he built the church of Notre Dame du Port, as a thankoffering for deliverance from the Black Plague, which for many years ravaged Clermont. The present crypt is his work, and the old altar, above which the Black Virgin is seated, is said to be that at which the angels officiated when the church was consecrated! In the light of the candles I can almost see their shining forms and faces, and the bent figure of the old bishop, as he kneels in adoration upon the altar steps.

It was here, in the crypt, they buried him, the great Gregory and Sidonius Apollinaris, another of his disciples, doubtless following as mourners. Here, in spite of the devastation wrought by the Normans, he continued to lie for twelve hundred years, and here, in all probability, some of his remains would still be found, save for another disaster which befell the church, the Revolution of 1793.

We had been sitting there for some time, when down the street came the sound of harsh military music, the "Marseillaise"! No doubt it was merely some boys' brigade or other harmless institution, but the rude sound clashed into the mysterious silence of the crypt so suddenly as to change my thoughts without rousing me from my reverie. As the band drew nearer, there was a rush of hurrying footsteps, voices, shouts, eager cries, till I pictured the street once more full of the mob of red-capped revolutionaries, coming to wreck the church and carry off the

relics and statues to burn in the Place de Jaude, as happened a century ago. I thought of Jeanne Geneix Ribeyre stealing to the crypt, with the intention of saving the beloved statue of the Virgin. One of her daughters has told the story; I found it in a little book at the *Magazin de l'Enfant Jésus*, close beside the porch:—

“My mother had heard that they were going to burn all the saints,” she says, “and was ‘dans l’huile bouillante’ for the Blessed Virgin, for whom she had a special devotion. At last she made up her mind to hide Her; but she was so short that she could not reach the statue, and all the chairs had been already broken and burned. So she went and told Mademoiselle Saunier, a friend who was older and taller than herself.

“‘If I were not so little,’ said my mother, ‘I would, at least, save the good Virgin of the Port!’

“Then they put their heads together, and presently, at midday when the streets were empty, went to the crypt, where the tall Mademoiselle Saunier took down the statue and gave it to my mother, who, hiding it under her dress, ran home with it.”

All through the days of the Terror, the image remained hidden, its whereabouts known only to one or two devoted friends; and when the evil days were past, the faithful learned with surprise and joy, that the beloved saint was safe, and saw Her restored to Her place of honour above the ancient altar in the crypt.

As at last I rose to go, down the steps came a young woman carrying a large metal can and a bucket with a cord. After whispering to the Sister, she set down her burden, knelt, and began a long prayer. I could see her lips moving, and her eyes lifted toward the Black Virgin. Presently the girl rose, opened the altar rail, removed the

conical cover of the sacred well, and began murmuring some mystical formula. She then took the bucket, and with many prayers and pious ejaculations, proceeded to lower it. A pause followed, and she stood with bowed head and moving lips. Then she pulled it up full of the pure, life-giving water, which was an object of worship ages before Saint Avit, or even Saint Austremoine, preached Christianity in Auvergne; and all the time the Virgin, above the altar, watched the ceremony, just as did the statue of the ancient Diva, who once presided over this sacred well.

When the cover had been replaced and the final prayer uttered, the girl turned to go.

"Would you have the goodness to tell me what you use that water for?" I asked.

She looked at me in surprise.

"But for the sick, Madame!"

The Sister had been watching, and now came forward.

"She is taking it to the hospital," she explained; "go, Anne Marie, you are already late!"

When she had departed, the Sister, finding I still lingered, smilingly offered me a candle.

"I will set it up on the stand, as soon as there is room," said she, as I paid my franc. After this it required but a question or so to lead her on to talk of the mysterious little statue which presides over this underground shrine. She told me of Saint Avit finding it, adding that the good bishop took it as a sign that the Blessed Virgin approved of the site he had chosen for the church. She mentioned many cures which had taken place there, directing my attention to the thousands of silver hearts with which the heavy pillars are wreathed, the crutches, and waxen models of limbs and babies.

"And She is never taken out?" I asked.

"Very seldom," said the Sister, "only on occasions of great public calamity. For instance, in the year 1614, when the winter was so cold and long that every one was in despair, the clergy determined to carry the statue of Our Lady through the streets of the city. As they came back to the door of the church, the weather suddenly changed, the air became warm, the sun shone out, and in a few days the corn, so long buried in the earth, appeared."

The Sister was ready enough with her naïve legend of Saint Austremoine, assuring me that he was that particular young man mentioned in the Gospel, who, wishful to attend the funeral of his father Judas and his mother Anne, was bidden by Our Saviour to "let the dead bury their dead." She informed me too, of the curious fact that the Religieuses du Bon Secours, whose duty it is to manufacture wafer for a vast number of churches, always use the sacred water of the fountain for mixing the paste. But she could tell me nothing satisfactory concerning the origin of this most celebrated of all the Black Virgins of Auvergne. And indeed who can?

During our stay at Clermont, we fell into the habit of spending the half-hour of twilight in the ancient crypt. No surroundings could have been more conducive to the working out of the sequence of events which have gone to build up the present cult of Notre Dame du Port. I used to sit there, in the shadow of one of St Avit's low squat pillars, gazing out at the radiance of the candles which always encircle the Virgin, till I grew to realize their significance as well as the Sister herself, who told me, in her grave subdued voice,

how here, as elsewhere, the candle is the symbol of Jesus Christ.

"Has not the Blessed Saint Anselm himself remarked," she would conclude, "that like as wax is produced by the virgin bee, so did Christ's body owe its origin to Our Virgin Lady? And as the wick dwells in the wax, so dwelt the divine soul of the Redeemer in His human body, which united, proclaimed His Divinity, even as the wick and wax show forth the flame."

Yet all the while a passage of Bacon lingered somewhere in the back of my practical English mind, as throwing a possible light on the source of this universal burning of candles :—

"The Romans had a god called Mars," says he, "that had been tofore a notable knight in battayle; and so they prayed to him for help, and for that they would speed the better of this knight, the people prayed and did great worship to his mother, that was called Februa, to whom they offered torches of burning candles, for hope to have the more help and succour of her son Mars. Then there was a Pope, that was called Sergius, and when he saw Christian people drawn to this false maumetry, he thought to undo this foule use and custom, and turn it into God's worship, and Our Lady's; and gave commandment that all Christian people should come to church and offer up a candle brennyng, in the worship that they did to this woman Februa; and do worship to Our Lady and to Her Sonne, Our Lord Jesus Christ."

On one incident, however, in the history of the Black Virgin, the Sister waxed eloquent, and that was when she spoke of the statue being stolen about forty-five years ago. No one knew who had stolen it; no one was even

suspected ! One morning, when the church was opened, the niche was discovered to be empty.

The news caused consternation through the town : people went into mourning, women wandered about the streets as though they were homeless, Masses were said, ceaseless prayers offered, but all seemingly without avail.

Nine years passed, when, one day, Monsieur Chardon, the Vicar-General, announced from the pulpit that the thief had confessed, and that on a given day the statue would be restored to its original place in the crypt. The name of the thief never transpired, nor the reason of the theft. But with regard to the facts leading to its restoration, the Sister declared that the sinner had told the priest he had seen tears flowing from the eyes of the Good Virgin of Heaven, and at the sight the realization of his crime overwhelmed him, and he confessed.

If ever you go to Clermont, be sure to follow my example : go and spend some minutes of each day, in the mysterious perfumed radiance of the crypt of Notre Dame du Port. You will find plenty to occupy your thoughts, to rouse your imagination, for the whole history of Clermont has taken place since those thickset pillars were reared. You will find it haunted by all manner of ghosts. Sidonius Apollinaris is sure to rise before your mind's eye, with his charming wife Papianilla, daughter of the Roman Emperor Avitus ; and their four children, the boy Apollinaris, and the three little daughters, Roscie, Sévérienne, and Alcine. The story of the good Sidonius has always fascinated me : there is none more beautiful and human among all the legends of the Christian saints. He was a great poet like the mighty God Apollo, from whom his family and that of his cousins of Polignac claimed their descent. He wrote letters, too, in which life in Gaul

during the fifth century is admirably portrayed. In still more ancient days, the forefathers of Sidonius were High Priests of Apollo, serving in the temple which formerly stood on the great rock of Polignac, near Le Puy. We will go there later, and see the remains of the famous "Oracle" to which kings and emperors resorted from all parts of Europe, and which was, no doubt, a source of considerable wealth to the ancestors of Sidonius. By the fifth century, however, they had abandoned their priesthood and become Christian.

While the children of Sidonius were yet young, he devoted himself to their education, bringing them up, as the legend says, "in the fear of the Lord; himself the mirror of husbands and the glory of the people of Auvergne." But no sooner were they educated, than a further change seemed to come over him. His poetry, which up to that time had been more than tinged with pagan symbolism, became entirely Christian; "instead of singing of Apollo, he chanted the praises of the Christ." His worldly ambitions were exchanged for heavenly aspirations, and, finally, he gave up his Prefecture to become Bishop of Clermont. His wife, Papianilla, retired to a house near the Palace with her daughters, where, in her solitude, she continued to watch over her fascinating unworldly husband.

Like all Celts, he had not the faintest idea of economy, and gave so much away to the poor that he frequently had to sell his silver to raise money for his charities. It was then that Papianilla would come to the rescue, gathering together what remained of her "dot," buying back the well-remembered cups and vessels which she knew her husband loved, and bribing the servants of the Palace to put them again in their places. But it was of

no avail, for the good bishop only sold them again, the next time he wanted money.

On the way back to the hotel you will pass the cathedral, and no doubt turn in at the south door, standing for a moment to watch the sunlight flowing through the rose windows, rousing all manner of delicate tints among the purple shadows of the nave. For the cathedral is built of Volvic lava, a stone as eternal and variable as the sea. When the sky is overcast, it has a dark, gloomy appearance, giving rise to the saying that the churches of Auvergne are black and forbidding. But enter when the sun is streaming through the stained-glass windows, flooding the purple walls with light, all the living fires of the volcano, whence the lava flowed, seem glowing and scintillating once more, flickering around the arches, shooting up into the roof, lying in amethyst pools across the floor. There are days when I have forgotten the sacred character of the cathedral of Clermont, and fancied myself among the glories of the submarine palace of some sea king.

This old city of Clermont has given birth to many saints since the Black Virgin of Le Port declared herself on the side of Christianity.

There are the Galls, the Genez, the Bonets, all bishops, all nobles, great figures in the history of Auvergne. Some were even warriors—we read of a bishop in the fourteenth century officiating in the cathedral, with a bird of prey on a perch at his left hand, and a halberd carried at his right. Indeed, most of these early ecclesiastics of Auvergne bear a certain likeness to the haughty and mysterious Druids, of whom they were the successors. The moral evolution of several centuries was needed before we reach such

characters as that of Massillon, that great and good bishop who did so much to reform the Church in the seventeenth century, and Blaise Pascal, whose father's house stands in the Cathedral Square. It was in one of the upper rooms that the little boy lay suffering from that mysterious illness, spoken of by his sister, Madame Périer; the chief symptoms of which were that the sight of water, or of his father and mother standing together, threw him into a convulsion.¹

It was in this house, too, that Madame Pascal died, leaving her husband and young children so desolate, that they went away to Paris, where their story is too well known to need telling. Everyone has heard of the little fellow who discovered for himself most of the propositions

¹ In 1625, such illnesses were attributed to children having been "overlooked," and suspicion fell on a certain old woman, a pensioner of the Pascal household. As the child grew steadily worse, Monsieur Pascal sent for the old woman, and threatened to give her over to justice unless she healed his son. The witch prayed and stormed, but Monsieur Pascal was inexorable. Finally the woman acknowledged that the child had been bewitched, and promised to remove the spell on condition that some animal died in the boy's place, as "the curse had been to the death." On this, Monsieur Pascal suggested a horse, but the reply was that a cat would answer the purpose, and one being at hand, the old witch went off with it in her arms. As she descended the staircase, the noise of some people quarrelling outside startled her, and a window being open, she dropped the cat into the street below. It was but a few feet, but the animal, which had been quite well the moment before, fell dead, and when they picked it up it was stiff and cold. Upon this, the woman hastened to the garden, picked some herbs, which she mixed with flour and water, and taking the paste to Monsieur Pascal, told him to put it over the child's stomach. Immediately the boy fell into so deep a lethargy, that the doctors thought he was dead, and would have buried him, save for his father's interference. Shortly after, the old woman returned, saying she had forgotten to warn them that the child would lie as though dead till about midnight, when he would awake cured. Two hours after the appointed time, as the father and mother were watching him, little Blaise opened his eyes, smiled happily up at his parents, and never afterwards had any return of this curious malady.

of the first book of Euclid, and wrote a learned treatise on conic sections, before he was sixteen years old ; they have heard, too, of his wonderful conversion and work amongst the poor of Paris.

I was looking over a magazine—*La Veillée d'Auvergne*,—last June, when I came upon an article on Pascal, and in it a copy of the script found in his pocket after his death. Pascal had the habit of writing isolated words, which to him expressed thoughts, and no doubt in the paper thus carefully kept, there is the record of the wonderful moment when all his life became transfigured ; in short, it gives an account of his conversion.

L'AN DE GRÂCE, 1654

Lundi, 23 novembre, jour de Saint Clément, pape et martyr, et autres au martyrologe,

Veille de Saint Chrysogone, martyr, et autres,

Depuis environ dix heures et demie du soir jusques environ minuit et demi,

FEU

“Dieu d'Abraham, Dieu d'Isaac, Dieu de Jacob,” non des philosophes et des savants.

Certitude. Certitude. Sentiment. Joie. Paix.

Dieu de Jésus-Christ.

Deum meum et Deum Vestrum.

“Ton Dieu sera mon Dieu.”

Oubli du monde et de tout, hormis Dieu.

Il ne se trouve que par les voies enseignées dans l'Evangile.

Grandeur de l'âme humaine.

"Père juste, le monde ne t'a point connu, mais je t'ai connu."

Joie, joie, joie, pleurs de joie.

Je m'en suis séparé :

Dereliquerunt me fontem aquæ vivæ.

"Mon Dieu, me quitterez-vous?"

Que je n'en sois pas séparé éternellement.

"Cette est la vie éternelle, qu'ils te connaissent seul vrai Dieu, et celui que tu as envoyé, Jésus Christ."

Jésus Christ.

Jésus Christ.

Je m'en suis séparé ; je t'ai fui, renoncé, crucifié.

Que je n'en sois jamais séparé.

Il ne se conserve que par les voies enseignées dans l'Evangile :

Renonciation totale et douce.

Soumission totale à Jésus Christ et à mon directeur.

Eternellement en joie pour un jour d'exercice sur la terre.

Non obliviscar sermones tuos. Amen.

"Renonciation totale et douce!" The words remind us of those of another great Celt, Ernest Renan, given to the world lately in the "Cahiers de Jeunesse," where the teacher, "too much of a Christian to be reckoned as such," as a modern French writer has said, has recorded his readiness to submit entirely to the will of God. "Allons! veux-tu que je me fasse petit enfant, que je renonce même à la science? Je veux bien . . ." (cinquième cahier, "Moi même," chap. xxxix.).

At the Hôtel de l'Univers everything is smart and new, indeed it gives one almost a shock to enter the white

painted hall, and find oneself reflected everywhere in the looking-glass walls. At lunch, when we happened to be in, we sit at one of the little tables and study the guests, and a wondrous community they are. The hotel is next door to the theatre, where all the entertainments of Clermont are held, so besides the regular habitués of the Hôtel de l'Univers, there are members of theatrical companies, operatic singers, dancers, musicians, managers.

One Sunday, there happened to be a race-meeting in the neighbourhood, and we found ourselves crowded out of existence by men dressed like exaggerated English jockeys, and ladies in the tightest and brightest of Parisian costumes, their huge black hats resting on their shoulders, and their elaborately decorated faces almost hidden by the puffs of golden hair which hung down over their ears. They ate heartily, however, and seemed to enjoy themselves vastly, judging by the noise they made. Their connexion with one another was not very easy to determine, as they called each other by their Christian names, and changed partners at each meal. If, for instance, after mature consideration, one made up one's mind that Lucille of the violet feather was the wife of Gaston with the shepherd's plaid breeches, and crimson waistcoat, she was sure to go off next morning in Henri's automobile, leaving Gaston to console himself with Andrée of the blue crêpe de Chine, who, up to then, we had regarded as the spouse of Victor. All this was very distracting.

A favourite question for discussion at our table used, I remember, to be French marriages *versus* English. I think it was a couple on the opposite side of the room who started us. *He* had so obviously the appear-

ance of a man who, if it were to do, wouldn't do it again! He was bored, yet so suspiciously courteous and respectful.

"How could he?" I had exclaimed, as I noticed the clay-coloured face with its beady eyes and crest of wiry black curls! "I suppose it was one of those French marriages, arranged by the two mamans," and I pitied poor Monsieur from the bottom of my heart: and, when, as happened more than once, I noticed him glancing furtively at Lucille of the violet feather, who, though vulgar, was not—well, like Madame, I looked hastily at his better half, hoping for his sake she did not notice him. And she never did! She was too much taken up with the salmi, or "bouches à la reine," or one of the other dainties for which the hotel is famed.

Then one day I met her in the salon, nursing a large doll for the landlord's little girl. She looked more ridiculous than ever, for she had been playing with the child, and the black toupée was all on one side. Yet, for the first time, I understood the possibilities of the French marriage. We sat together and played with the little one, and, with that pathetic confidence a Frenchwoman is so ready to show to one of her own sex, she told me how her own child had died years ago, and showed me a little portrait which she kept inside the bosom of her dress.

That evening, Monsieur was late for dinner, and I saw Lucille give him a warning smile as he passed her table. But it was of *Madame* I was thinking as I glanced hurriedly to see if she had noticed the salutation.

Beyond, near the window, were a fat husband and wife, who looked more cheerful, as all their attention was evidently concentrated on the dinner. At the second course, her brother or his brother or some one else's

brother, you couldn't say which, for they were all exactly alike, came in and greeted them effusively, giving a hand to each to save time, his eyes fixed with eager anticipation on the "hors d'œuvres."

It was impossible to feel dull at the Hôtel de l'Univers. New specimens of French humanity were always arriving. There was the gentleman who had to have a hot brick on which to put his feet, and whose wife had two black and tan terriers. The husband ate nothing but boiled fish, while the wife contented herself with a bowl of bread and milk, the terriers systematically going through the whole of the seven or eight course dinner. And there was the professor who sat by the glass door, and conducted a discreet flirtation with the young lady at the desk in the hall. After meals we would go and sit on green chairs outside the hotel, and play with the landlord's little girl and her fox-terrier puppy, while our host talked about England, the Savoy, and the Carlton, where he had been trained, and had learned how to make his hotel one of the most comfortable in France.

I have no time to take my reader to Royat, which is a pity, as, in spite of its being a mere health resort, and therefore not within the scope of this book, it is an extremely beautiful place where we should find a wonderfully interesting Romanesque church, built, so Fléchier says, over the spot where Saint Austremoine, as mentioned above, had an oratory.

Neither can we wander out to the village of Bois-Séjour, lying among the beautifully wooded hills to the south, and eat peaches and omelette-au-lard at the little inn opposite the church. In this church, by the by, painted up on the wall of the chapel dedicated to Saint Joseph, we found

this curiously chosen text: "Allez à Joseph"! (Gen. xli. 55).

But there is one short expedition we must take together, before setting out again on our travels.

A mile or so out of Clermont, approached by one of those screaming electric trams, which, like banshees, haunt the Place de Jaude, is Ferrand, or Mont Ferrant as it was called in Froissart's days: and it is chiefly on account of those days that anyone now takes the trouble to leave wealthy Clermont and visit her squalid slatternly sister.

Six hundred years ago Mont Ferrand was a rich and fashionable place. Great ladies dwelt there, and it was considered a more distinguished residence than Clermont itself.

"In this town," says Geronnet de Maudurant, when making his plans known to the Captain of Chalucet, who had ransomed him and his companions from the hands of the Knight Sir John Bonne-Lance, "in this town there is great wealth, and wherewithal to plunder; for besides its riches in silk and merchandise, many of the inhabitants have much money.

Poor souls! They have little enough now!

As we mounted the steep and gloomy street, down which the gay ladies once rode to meet their favourite knight Sir John Bonne-Lance, we were quickly surrounded by a crowd of ragged boys, clamorous to earn a penny by acting as guides to the town. "The church, Monsieur? This way to the church!"—"Pardon, Madame!" and I found myself grappling with a youth, who wanted to be paid for carrying my camera.

Finally, to escape their importunities, we accepted the invitation of a clean-looking old woman, who stood at the door of her house, like the proverbial spider, inviting

passers-by to "walk into her parlour!" A queer old place we found it, full of an extraordinary collection of rubbish, which she dignified by the name of a "museum"! But the building itself was interesting, ancient enough to have been the very house in which Sir John lodged his twelve prisoners, when he left them and went back to continue the siege of Ventadour. The old woman, however, knew nothing about such things: to her the past was the past, and anything that belonged to it went into her exhibition.

"Voilà, Monsieur-Dame, le parapluie de Papa!" as though she had shown us a shoe of Perrot le Béarnois. So presently I left her exhibiting the worthless daubs and rags of lace she called her "musée," and wandered upstairs to the big dark room, where it pleased me to picture the too-confiding Sir John giving his last charge to his prisoner, Geronnet de Maudurant. "You will remain here," says the knight, "as hostage for your companions, who are going to seek your ransom; and when you have paid it, you may depart . . . and remember that I have treated you handsomely, Geronnet."

"On my faith!" cries the brigand in his loud, devil-may-care voice, "on my faith, my fair lord and master, we are bounden by your generous conduct!"

But all the same, as Froissart says, "it would have been better for the town if Sir John had killed or drowned them!"

And so, no doubt, thought the rich merchants, and the Governor on that Thursday night in the following February, when the prince of brigands, Perrot le Béarnois, and his companions, were smuggled into the town by this same traitor Geronnet, and made themselves master of Ferrand and its riches. One of the old houses which stand nodding

their tottering heads at one another, across the street, is probably the Crown Inn, at which Geronnet put up when, disguised as a merchant, he returned to open the gates of the city to his friends.

Froissart tells the story in his usual racy manner, and those of us who, as children, have listened to the splendid chronicle, will best appreciate the old town and its associations.

In one of the fifteen side-chapels of the church, we found a tiny black antique statue of the Virgin, which attracted my attention, since, as my readers may have gathered by this time, I am much interested in such things.

A woman was dusting the altar, which, in truth, needed it badly !

"How long has that statue been here?" I asked, for I had never heard of a black Virgin of Ferrand.

The woman ceased her work.

"It was brought here," she said, "after the Terror. I suppose some one saved it from one of the chapels of which so many were destroyed, and, later, gave it to this church."

Poor pathetic little image! It bore no name; no one even remembered whence it had come. Once, no doubt, it had been regarded as a centre of some special and popular cult, for the woman added that it was still "good for giving children!" But the days of its glory are over. No votive offerings hang to the bracket on which it stands, it has not even been given a position over the altar. The tiny form before which, during hundreds of years, women came, and prayed, and burned candles, to which were offered golden hearts and waxen babies innumerable, is now merely tolerated, given a shelter in the sanctuary queened over by the Virgin of Lourdes. Only the poorest and humblest of

women come to kneel before the little shrine, yet judging by the crowd of dirty and uproarious ragamuffins who clamoured at us as we left the church, the forgotten Black Virgin of Ferrand is as powerful and efficacious as ever !

CHAPTER V

Veyre—Castle of Buron—Modern Witchcraft—Issoire—Besse—
The Church of Saint André—The Black Virgins of the Mont Dore—
Lac Pavin—Vassivière—La Montée de Notre Dame de Vassivière

“IF Madame is interested in Black Virgins, she should by all means go to Besse, and assist at La Montée de Notre Dame de Vassivière.” So spake the landlord of the Hôtel de l’Univers, as we sat outside the door after dinner, sipping our coffee, and listening to the strains of the ubiquitous “Merry Widow,” as played by the orchestra of the Café de Paris.

It appeared that at one time our host had stayed at Mont Dore, which is within a walk (an Auvergnat’s walk!) of Vassivière, and had on one occasion witnessed the curious ceremonies connected with the summer outing of the famous statue of Our Lady, and thereby been much impressed. He explained how the “saint” has both her summer and winter shrine, so that when the autumn storms begin gathering round the summit of the Puy de Sancy, the handful of peasants who have been feeding their cows over the high pastures of Vassivière, close the “burons” or hovels where they have been picnicing during the summer months, and with their Bonne Dame at their head, march down in procession to the ancient town of Besse, which lies in a valley some eight kilometres to the north-east. There, sheltered by the old brown fortifications, they and their cattle pass the

long dark days of winter, watched over by the antique statue which has always accompanied the cows in their semi-annual migrations.

And now it was spring, for summer, real summer, rarely comes to these mountain regions. The sky was opening, the sun had already melted the snows, the pastures were once again rich and luscious, and the cows eager to be off. But most eager of all would be Notre Dame de Vassivière. For though the great church of Besse, built by the ancient lords of La Tour d'Auvergne, and enriched by Catherine de Médicis and her daughter Margot, Queen of Navarre, is "exceeding magnificent," rivalling in beauty the finest churches of Auvergne, the Black Virgin prefers her humble mountain home. "And so," concluded the landlord, "if she is not taken up in procession on the second of July, she starts off, and goes by herself, or so the peasants assure one!"

"The second of July!" I exclaimed; "but that is the day after to-morrow. Can one reach Besse in a day?"

The landlord looked at us regretfully. We were occupying his best room. Still he was an Auvergnat, and consequently truthful.

"There is the automobile," said he; "Monsieur Bastide told me this evening that it is in perfect order. The roads are excellent, the machine will travel like a bird!"

We had been loitering round Clermont for days, and though the quiet wandering among the hills had been infinitely restful, the prospect of the journey was delightful and exhilarating. There is an irresponsibility about motoring which appeals strongly to certain natures. Most of us are gipsies at heart, and the automobile is the nearest approach to a gipsy van possible to an

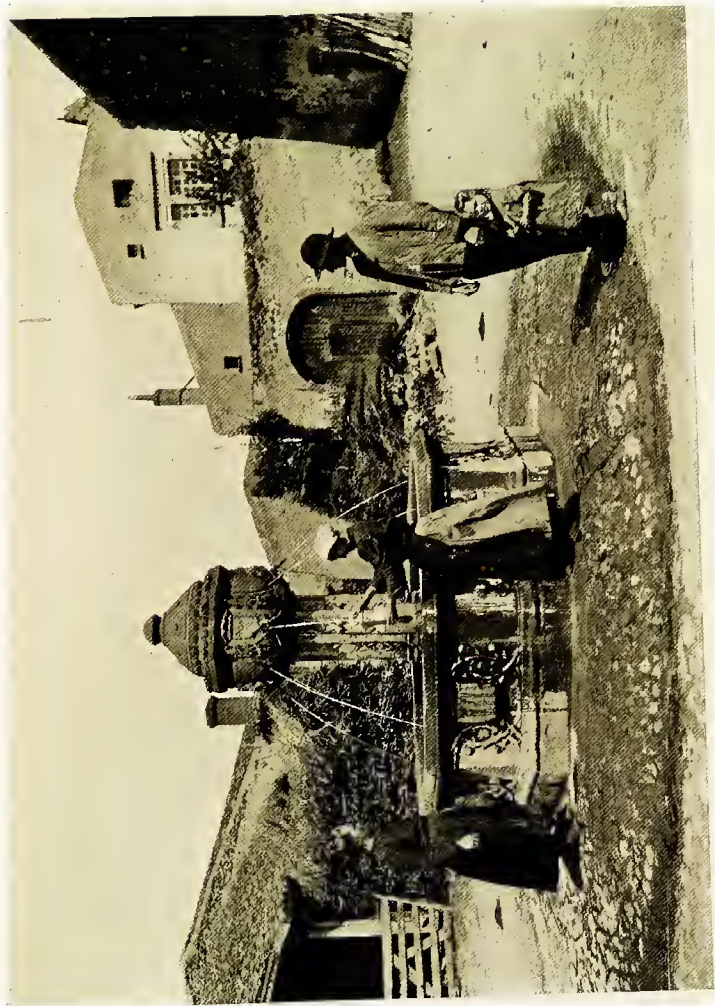
English doctor and his wife in this twentieth century. No packing, no dresses to change, no letters, no trains to catch, no regular meals to provide, no fixed place of abode, no thought for the morrow, no regret for the past. Picture it, oh Mrs Grundy, parading up and down at one of your favourite resorts, and shudder in your best bib and tucker, at thought of the dear disreputable life!

For when "winter is past the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, and the time of the singing of birds is come," others beside Solomon and the Black Virgin feel that they must "arise and haste away!"

"Au revoir, Monsieur-Dame! Bon voyage! A la bonne rencontre!"

We found all the country smiling, as though to welcome us; even the automobile seemed delighted to be off once more. Uphill she sang, downhill she whispered, and always the same cheery, busy, even pace. Our way lay past Veyre, the Gaulish village, above which, high on the Puy de Menton, can be seen the huge statue of the Virgin, raised over the "dolmen," or "fairy-stone," around which the wedding dances used to be held.

Presently across the river we saw the great castle of Buron, set on a lofty height, misty and dim, like the ages which have passed since it lived its life. There stands the once mighty feudal fortress, and clustering below, a group of poor little cottages, striking parable of the survival of the humble. The great castle, where the Counts of Auvergne once dwelt, tyrannizing over the district, has for ages been a lifeless ruin, while the village, which formerly lived on the crumbs which fell from its



A VILLAGE FOUNTAIN

extravagant table, is as alive, and far more prosperous and happy, than in the old days of dependence.

We had just run through Coudes, and were winding our way along the picturesque gorge of the Allier, when we came upon a survival of the past, such as, I think, would not be possible in any province of France, save Auvergne. It was a woman! Her hair hung wild and disordered on her filthy bare shoulders; she wore no hat, and scarcely any clothes save a few miserable rags. But what was most terrible was, that her wretched condition seemed to excite in us no feeling except disgust. As she stood there, in the sunlight, she was merely loathsome—a sore on the fair surface of the landscape. I cannot explain the sensation, perhaps I ought to be ashamed to own it. It was like coming face to face with one of those hairy prehistoric ancestors of ours, whom we all try so hard to forget. She stood in the middle of the road, making no attempt to get out of the way, and her mouth opened as though she were going to curse us. Then, as the car swerved to the right to avoid her, she gave an evil laugh, turned her back, and disappeared.

A few days afterwards I was talking over our journey with an Auvergnat friend, and happened to mention this wretched creature.

"She must have been a witch!" exclaimed she. "There are many in Le Centre. Most villages possess one. The people have more faith in a woman like that than in a regular doctor; besides, they are less expensive. I expect you disturbed her while she was gathering herbs. It is fortunate that she did not lay a spell on you; they do not like automobiles," and she laughed uneasily.

"But *you* surely do not believe in witches?" I exclaimed.

My friend's eyes fell. "I can only tell you what I

have heard," said she. "I was brought up among the peasants of Corrèze, and certainly *they* believe in witches."

She went on to tell me of an old woman who lived near the village of her nurse. It appeared that this witch was always called in when there was anything wrong with the cows. "She used to say something," added my friend, and, after a moment's reflection, repeated: "'Te, te, ante te, et super ante te.' When I told my father he said that it meant, 'I, the devil, am more ancient than Thou, oh Jesus, and more powerful.' You see the witch had her power from the devil," she added.

I asked whether she had ever been treated by one of these women. "Yes," said she, "I remember once I had a patch of ringworm which worried my nurse a good deal. As it would not get well, she took me to the witch, who made the sign of the cross over my head, while we repeated five 'Paters' and five 'Aves.' Then she said, 'Dartre, va-t'en, tu es guérie!'"

"And you lost the ringworm?"

"Certainly," replied my friend demurely. "I had the faith which they say is necessary for such cures, and my nurse had placed a piece of silver over the sore!"¹

After we lost sight of the sorceress the country seemed to smile more and more enchantingly. The granite rocks, ruddy and warm, were covered with wild thyme, and

¹ One of the most curious treatments of these witches is that recommended for complaints of the eye. It is given in a pamphlet, recently published locally, on the superstitions of Auvergne.

The witch uses a stone for this cure, a little white stone, and if you ask where she got it, she will tell you that she took out the eye of a swallow, just as he was about to fly away, and that next year when he reappeared, he brought this stone in his empty socket in place of the eye he had lost. She lifts the eyelid of the patient, and slips the tiny pebble underneath. When she takes it out, the eye is well!

draped by roses and honeysuckle. On the hillsides were patches of bright green vineyard, and on every crest perched a little village, so much the colour of the rock that one would have passed it unnoticed, save for the tell-tale red of its tiled roofs. Now and then we would meet a girl, leading her sheep to pasture, her large cotton apron turned up, full of the needle-work she was taking with her to the fields.

At Issoire we found a magnificent church, almost a facsimile of that of Notre Dame du Port, and, running round the frieze outside the apse, the signs of the Zodiac, a curious symbol to find on a Christian building.

Legend says that the name "Issoire" is derived from that of the goddess Isis, who had a celebrated shrine on the spot where the church now stands, so that probably a good deal of pagan symbolism permeated the ritual once practised in this building.

It was to Icliodorum, as it was called in the first centuries, that Saint Austremoine, the Apostle of Auvergne, of whom I have spoken earlier, came to end his days. He had established a school for young priests and nobles, or more probably had taken over the goodwill of an already existing Druidical establishment. The neighbourhood seems to have been largely inhabited by Jews, whom Austremoine, in spite of his many years and failing strength, set to work to convert. The Jew, however, of the first century was as hard to convince of his blindness as his brother of to-day, and, for a long time, the old missionary laboured in vain.

At last he made a convert, a young man of good family, to whom, at baptism, he gave the name "Lucius," thereby signifying that he was the first light in that abode of darkness. But why tell the story? Every one at Issoire knows

the legend of Lucius' martyrdom. You can see the well into which he was cast by his savage father, and the great stone at the village of Boulade, where, later, the Jews tortured and finally beheaded the good Austremoine. The two martyrs were buried together in the enclosure of the Christian monastery near by. But the people of Iclidorum were unworthy of having the remains of two such godly men in their midst. Alive or dead, they never appreciated the glorious Austremoine, and neglected his shrine in such a disgraceful fashion, that it was finally removed by Pépin le Bref to the new church he was building at Marsat. It is said that on the day of the translation of the relics, the king insisted on carrying the "chasse" himself, so great was his devotion to the memory of Saint Austremoine. It was perhaps on account of the indifference of the people of Issoire to the memory of the saint, that later he made no special effort to protect the town, and it was devastated in turn by the Germans, the Vandals, the Alains, the Burgundians, the Huns, the Wisigoths, the Franks, and the Saxons. Indeed, it is astonishing that any trace at all is left of the old city of Isis. Finally, the remnant was rent asunder during the Wars of Religion. Catholics murdered Protestants, Protestants retaliated on Catholics. The town fell into the hands of the archfiend Merle, of whom the Duc de Montpensier said: "With Merle at my side, I would attack hell itself, were it full of fifty thousand devils!" And all the time, the great basilica of St Austremoine looked down upon the seething mass of suffering humanity, while the Catholic priest at the altar, and the Protestant monk in the pulpit, hurled abuse at one another. "Allez! Allez! sale Jacobin!" yelled the priest. "Ohè, Papiste, Papiste! Ohè, cafard!" screamed the Lutheran. Then at last came

the Duc d'Alençon, and swept them all away, raising over the ruins a great monument, with the words, "Icy fust Issoire." Yet to-day the town survives.

We lunched in company with several commercial travellers, all intent upon their own concerns and the quality of the food served out to them. Opposite to me sat a farmer, a true Auvergnat, with the round head of his far-away Mongolian ancestors, and a pair of twinkling grey eyes, which gave a curious contradiction to his grave face, with its solemn mouth and brown side-whiskers. He wore a dark blue smock, open at the neck, showing a white pleated shirt front, and a large red necktie, fastened in a bow; in fact, he was quite a dandy. Like ourselves, he seemed to have little in common with the men of commerce, and presently we fell into conversation. I asked him if he knew Besse. Why, to be sure he did. Was it not his native town? And his eyes sparkled when I told him that we were on our way thither to take part in the festival to be held the next morning.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "how I wish I were going to be there, if only to show the gentlefolk some little hospitality!" and he sighed regretfully. "However," he continued, "Monsieur le Doyen will be in his rectory behind the church. He is always pleased to see strangers; he will tell you the history of everything. But, Madame, do not fail to go and see the Lac Pavin, lying at the bottom of its crater. People speak to me of the Lakes of Lucerne and Geneva! Bah! why should one travel to foreign lands when one has such wonders at one's very door?"

During the greater part of the afternoon we had the company of the river Couze, which rises in the mysterious

crater lake of which the farmer spoke. But the Couze of the valley is a very different stream from the Couze of the mountain ; flowing gently along through meadow-land and woods, washing the base of towering rocks, upon which are perched ruined castles, beautiful Montagut-le-Blanc, or little Saint-Diérez, where the roses and honeysuckle climb round the old armorial lions upon the gate-posts. Once we crossed the river to visit the Grottes de Jonas, that extraordinary deserted monastery cut in the face of the cliff.

At last, still following the banks of the stream, we arrived at the quaint old-fashioned little town of Besse, hiding prudishly behind its grim forbidding walls, as in the days when the bold lords of La Tour d'Auvergne used to visit it, to make their Easter Communion in the great Romanesque church of Saint André.

The good Rector was entertaining some of his brother priests in his pretty parsonage. On hearing that we were English, he called his old gardener and told him to show us round the church, and in particular to point out the curious sculptures and give us their signification.

"I regret exceedingly not being able to show Madame this civility," he concluded, "but," and he waved his hand toward the door of the study, where I could hear the sound of loud jolly voices raised in argument, "you see how it is. Some of my brother rectors have come to assist at La Montée."

"The town is so quiet," said I, "that we almost doubted whether the procession was really to be held."

"Yes," rejoined the old priest rather sadly, "we have still a precarious liberty to pursue these ancient customs ; but how long it will be permitted us to do so, who can say !"

"Is the pilgrimage as popular as ever ?"

He shook his head. "You will see," he said, "if you assist at La Montée. Les Reinages de Notre Dame were put up to auction last Sunday according to the ancient custom. There were barely twelve bidders! Yet it is not so long ago when there would be fifty porters, and seventy or eighty queens. Ah, what a procession it made, as it wound its way up the mountain!"¹

"It is sad to see an old custom die, after so many centuries," said I sympathetically.

"Yes," said the priest, "it *is* sad. All changes are sad. But we must not despair. The good Mother herself knows how difficult it is to maintain these religious practices. And after all it may be Her will that they should dwindle and cease. We must remember that they are merely props to sustain and encourage our faith. Perhaps the time has come when we are called to stand without them."

Here the old gardener appearing, the Rector gave us over into his charge, and returned to the clerical party in the study.

We found the Black Virgin standing above the high altar, ready robed for the morrow; but as the light was fading, we postponed the further consideration of the statue, and turned to examine the sculptures. After pointing out the Judgment of the Drunkard, whose soul is being dragged off by three devils, while the body lies dead upon a bed, and a curious monster, half horse, half man, with the name "Minorta" carved upon it, we turned to the last.

"This," said the old man, "represents the return of the son of Tobit, accompanied by the Archangel Michael. Observe the dog, how happy he is to be at home once more!"

¹ At these processions, there was formerly a "king" and "queen," the right to these titles being put up to auction.

I made some rejoinder, but my attention was taken up by a curious-looking object like a bird carved on a pillar. I asked what it was.

"Perhaps it is the sparrow which blinded Tobit!" suggested the man, smiling.

"Or it might be a bat," I said. And went on to tell him of the woman of Saint-Amand and her fear of the bat: "*Fermez les yeux, Madame!*" she had cried, "*fermez les yeux!* He will very likely *faire tomber quelque chose*, and that will blind you."

"Ah," said the man, "but it was a sparrow that blinded Tobit, though, to be sure, how could he have been certain, since he was asleep at the time."

"These superstitions prevail here also?" I asked.

"But certainly! Indeed they can scarcely be reckoned as superstitions. Every one in Auvergne knows that the bat brings misfortune. I myself remember an instance of it. I was a boy at the time, working on a farm near Champs. One evening in the month of September, we were all seated at supper in the great kitchen, when a bat flew in, and after going into all the corners as though in search of something, suddenly turned and disappeared through the door, which had remained wide open. I remember José the shepherd turned the colour of skimmed milk.

"'You saw that Ratapenade?' he exclaimed, turning to me; 'she came for one of us! Someone is going to die in this house,' and he signed himself.

"'Quelles sornettes!' cried the farmer. 'Why, it was only a bat! Do not listen to him, boy; he will make you as superstitious as he is himself!' You see the farmer came from Touraine, where they believe nothing save what they read in the journals!

"'Eh bien!' I heard José mutter, 'we shall see if the old



A CARD PARTY IN CANTAL.

ones are not right!' and he added, turning to me, 'these beasts smell death in the air! They are terrible! They are a little bit of the devil himself, look you!'

"I was used to old José's tales, however, and went to bed quite comfortably. But next day a frightful thing happened. The farmer, a strong healthy man of fifty, who had never had a day's illness in his life, fell down dead in the harvest field. His last word was to tell José to be sure and not sell the calf for less than fifteen pistoles."

"A strange story!" said I. "But, after all, no doubt a mere coincidence."

The man shook his head. "Ah, that is what Monsieur le Curé says," said he. "But for myself I never care to see a bat unless I am in the company of some one I dislike."

After he had finished his round of the sculptures, the gardener departed, and we went to look at the famous little statue. Several women were praying, and one old crone who had finished telling her beads, rose at our approach, and we stood together looking up at the Saint.

"Can you tell me," I asked, "why La Sainte Vierge is black?" The old woman looked at me with her large, brown, dreamy eyes, eyes which had seen so much more of heaven than of earth during the seventy years she had passed among the mountains.

"But does Madam then not know that La Bonne Dame was a negress?" she asked in surprise.

"A negress?" I exclaimed, "how very curious," for I had never heard this explanation of the Black Virgins of Auvergne.

"Our fathers assure us," continued the woman, "that the Blessed Saints of the Mont Dore, Our Ladies of Vassivière, La Font Sainte, La Tour, and Eglise

Neuve, were four black sisters of whom Notre Dame de Vassivière was the eldest. They came from the East, and took up their abode among the peasants of these parts."

"But how did they find their way to Mont Dore?" I asked, wondering whether I had stumbled upon some old legend connected with the settlement of the early races in Auvergne.

The old lady shook her head.

"Madame, I cannot tell," she said, "It is a very high mountain, the Mont Dore; perhaps they saw it from the East. I only know what I have been told by my grandmother, who had it from her grandmother, that the Four Blessed Sisters, finding life hard for the people of these mountains, as indeed it is! dwelt among them and taught them religion. Voilà tout!" and crossing herself she turned away as though the matter were quite settled.

Next morning the ringing of bells awoke us early, and going over to the church, we found it full of peasants, assisting at Mass, which was being said by the Dean. I do not know whether it was imagination, but there seemed a cloud of melancholy overshadowing the old building, and when at eight o'clock the little statue, gorgeously robed, was placed in the gilt and glass palanquin, and borne forth down the steps, past the house of Queen Margaret of Navarre, and so out through the old fortified gateway into the open country, the black-robed procession of men and women following, singing their minor chant, looked as though they were attending a funeral.

It is about eight miles from Besse to the mountain chapel of Vassivière, where the Black Virgin spends the three months of summer. The statue is carried all the way by relays of bearers; and the choristers, school

children, and congregation follow on foot. But the clergy, with the exception of one harassed-looking young curate, pack themselves into carts and wagonettes, and for me . . . my husband and the car were waiting just beyond the bend of the road. So while the great procession was getting under way, we had time to visit the strange haunted Lac Pavin. We found it as our friend the farmer at Issoire had said, lying at the bottom of a yawning crater, the limpid water filling half the cup, while the upper part was covered with trees and grass, forming a perpendicular circular wall of verdure about a hundred and fifty feet in height. The lake is said to have no bottom; the waters reaching right down to the centre of the earth. No fish live in it, and if you throw stones into the water, the sky will darken, the hail beat down, the still waters of the lake will rise in angry waves, and the whole basin be filled with a ghastly howling tempest. As to venturing in a boat upon the magical lake, there is not a peasant for miles around who would dare the feat. For no sooner would he have left the bank, than Lac Pavin would become a racing giddy whirlpool, and the daring boatman would be sucked down into the yawning gulf, to feed those fires which are ever burning at the bottom of the crater. It is dangerous even to fire off a gun there, for horrible fumes and poisonous exhalations arise at the sound! The water too is injurious even to the touch, much more if tasted! For myself I must acknowledge that I experienced none of these horrors. It was a grey morning, and the lake lay at the bottom of its leafy cup, like a pool of molten lead. Trembling, I threw in a stone. It fell with a heavy PLOP! But though the ripples spread and spread till the surface was like moire silk, they died away, leaving the lake as still and brooding as before. Having no gun

with us, we clapped our hands, and shouted till we were hoarse, but the mocking voices which answered us were only echoes of our own. After that, I ventured to bathe my face in the water, and even to taste it, but still nothing happened, so with something of a feeling of disappointment we turned, and climbed our way out of the crater, back to the road where we had left the car.

Vassivière is one of those districts it would be almost impossible for the tourist to reach, save for the invention of the automobile, and as we paused at the culminating point of the road and gazed around us, a feeling of gratitude arose in our hearts for whoever it was who first thought of the contrivance.

It was, as I have said, the second of July, but the air was brisk and invigorating with a sense of the mountains. On either side the road lay a billowy ocean of grey-green pasture, stained here and there by patches of gold, crimson, and blue, while in the distance rose the bare grey heads of the giants, who sit guarding the summer sanctuary of the mysterious little image, whose festival we were about to attend. In all the broad landscape not a tree, not a bush, only miles upon miles of undulating breezy plateau, roofed by a strange brooding grey sky. A little farther we came upon a low-browed shanty, skulking behind a hillock, where, leaving the car, we turned from the main road, and began climbing the pilgrim track which leads to the Chapel of La Bonne Dame de Vassivière.

Round the ancient stones which pave it the grass had crept, for the path is little used during the nine months when the statue is at Besse. The rocks on either side are covered with flowers, purple pansies, white orchis, golden shepherd's purse, sweet wild thyme, and all the rosy little mountain plants which gather in clans wherever

the lichens have prepared a footing for them. It was as though the way had been decorated for the passing of a bride, only no human hand could have arranged it so daintily. As we mounted higher, the hills began to smile out through the clouds, the way grew steeper, so that more than once we had to rest beside one of the old crosses, which have been set up by the different parishes of the Mont Dore. Over the swelling plateau we could see the road, running like a grey thread, and approaching it from every direction scattered groups of black-gowned peasants, coming from distant villages and lonely farms, to take part in the great festival of La Montée. The procession itself is not yet in sight, so rising we go onward, till a jangling of bells above tells us that we are nearing the PLACE OF COWS,¹ and raising our eyes we see against the skyline the wild solitary figure of the herd, watching to give the first signal of the COMING. High over all are the mountains, still veiled in cloud, mysteriously; though, strangely enough, above the chapel itself, the grey has opened, leaving a canopy of blue, the Virgin's own colour! For the path has grown less steep, the old stone Stations with which it is bordered have ceased, we are crossing the lip of the plateau of Vassivières.

How I wish I could picture it to you! Neither the village, the fountain, nor the chapel can have changed at all, since the days when Catherine de Médicis and her daughter Margot, Queen of Navarre, came hither to drink the waters and visit the Black Virgin. As we enter the great green lap of the Puy de Sancy, the giant mountain gazes down upon us, his vast shoulders blocking the view to the north, his arms stretched out protectingly on either side. There

¹ Vassivières is also spelt Vaccivières, and is said by some to be derived from *vacca*, a cow.

is the stone cross, planted, as Jacques Branche, the Prior of Pébrac, says, speaking in the beginning of the seventeenth century, "de temps immémorial," and there, on the site of a far older worshipping place, stands the "grande église à trois autels," built in 1555, by the clergy and inhabitants of Besse.

Grey it is, battered with age and weather. There is no enclosure; the pastures reach to the very walls, the stone cabins of men and beasts crowding round as though for protection, the cows feeding peacefully beside the ever-open door, sniffing now and again, and raising their soft eyes to see whether their patron saint has yet returned, to bless them with her presence.

But first let us visit the fountain, for there we shall find the earliest object of the cult practised at Vassivière. Long before the Black Virgin took it under her protection, WATER, symbol of PURITY and HEALING, was here held sacred and adored. There is no doubt that the ritual which centres round this spring, dates back to a time much anterior to the days when Saint Marcial and Saint Florus came preaching Christianity to Auvergne.¹

As we look around and remember how most of the rivers of this region take their rise among the mountains by which we are surrounded, we shall realize how natural it was that the early Celtic settlers, who had such a reverence for springs of water, should have regarded this fountain with peculiar veneration. To them it seemed the Mother of those streams upon which the life of the district depended, and so here the priests of the tribe established a water cult, which developed, as such cults are wont to do, into the worship of ideal purity.

¹ Another and more probable derivation of the name Vassivière, is from two Celtic words, *Vas Iver*, meaning Temple of Water.



THE FOUNTAIN OF VASSIVIERES

It is not difficult to see that, after a time, this purity of the water should itself become personified ; and if we add the belief that from pure water issues health and healing, we quickly arrive at the idea of a virgin mother giving birth to a divine healer. Such is the origin of many of the shrines dedicated to Our Lady, and in the case of Vassivières, even the clergy agree that Christianity merely sanctified and renamed the little image of the mother and child she found already established there.

It is therefore with a certain feeling of reverence that I always approach these ancient fountains, whose worship is so infinitely older than that practised in the chapels which have superseded them. We found the gate enclosing the basin shut. As we were turning away, however, the sacristan of the chapel came and unlocked it, saying that it was closed in order to keep the spring clean, the official of the church still the custodian of the sacred water ! We found this descendant of the ancient Priest of the Fountain quite an intelligent person. He told us of the destruction of Vassivières by the English in the fourteenth century. For a long time afterwards it seems the plateau remained desolate, though among the ruins the Fountain still bubbled up clear and pure, while in a broken niche above, stood the Black Virgin, "*toujours honorée des voyageurs !*" as he took care to inform me, and performing miracles as successfully as ever.

At last the clergy of the neighbouring town of Besse professed themselves scandalized that the Blessed Virgin, as she had long been called, should be left in such a humble spot, and proceeded to transport the statue from the ruined niche above the fountain, to the magnificent church which had just been completed by Bernard, eighth Lord of

La Tour d'Auvergne. But they reckoned without their host (or hostess).

No lady, be she saint or goddess, young or old, white or black, allows herself to be disposed of in so arbitrary a manner! The morning after the translation, the mysterious black image had vanished, and as the priests stood amazed, looking at the empty pedestal, a poor woman who had brought her cow down to market, reported that La Bonne Dame was back in her own place above the sacred fountain.

Again and again was she fetched, each time with greater honours and more imposing ceremonial, but no amount of satin robes or gold embroideries could reconcile the Black Virgin to her new abode. Novel fashions in dress had no attraction for her! She loved her mountain pasture, the scent of her flowers, the song of the birds and insects, the sweet breath of the cows, the whisper of the ever-flowing fountain. In short she was a true Celtic goddess. The people of Besse were in despair. The more the Saint refused to stay with them, the more they coveted her. At last an idea occurred to the Rector. His parishioners must all club together and found a Mass, to be said at the High Altar every Wednesday for ever, promising at the same time, that if the Black Virgin would but consent to spend the winter at Besse, she should pass the summer months beside her beloved fountain at Vassivières. And so a compromise was effected, and it became a custom for the people of Besse to carry the sacred image up to the mountain on the second of July, the festival of the Visitation, and to bring it down again at the end of September, on the Sunday next after Saint Matthew's Day.

Such was the sacristan's account of the origin of La Montée, though I believe myself that the custom dates back

to far far older times. As I entered the chapel I was struck by the air of expectation which pervaded it. Perhaps it was due to that empty niche above the altar, to which all faces were turned so eagerly. Below hovered two golden angels with outspread wings, while high over the canopy shone the emblem of the crescent moon, the horns pointing upward.

All was hushed commotion, eager suspense. Candles were being lit, confessions heard, here and there groups of ancient women, in the marvellous bonnets of Auvergne, sat with silently moving lips telling their beads.

Presently four of them rose as by one consent, and left the chapel, and I with them. As we crossed the threshold the eldest woman began murmuring a litany, the others answering in their thin quavering trebles :—

“ Notre Dame de Vassivière, who makest the blind to see,
Priez pour nous !

Notre Dame de Vassivière, who makest the paralytic to walk,
Priez pour nous !

Poor sinners that we are, turn us from our evil ways,
We beseech thee, oh Notre Dame de Vassivière ! ”

As we reached the third calvary they stopped, and I saw them fall upon their knees :—

“ O God, who bringest lifegiving water from the barren rock, pour forth in our lives a devotion to this stainless Virgin, which may ever flow as a source of living water, abundant, fertilizing ! ”

I looked down the hill-side. Along the distant stretch of road, a sinuous black line was making its way. The Lady of Vassivière was in sight. I could hear the chanting ; the sound was carried up together with the scent of the wild thyme. Then a lark began singing, and another, and

another, till the air was full of song. And still the chant came nearer. A group of calves who had been gambolling together, suddenly raised their heads and listened, snuffing the air ; and the wind freshened, breaking up the clouds, while the patch of blue sky spread and spread, till, just as the procession entered the bounds of Vassivière, the sun shone out in all his glory.

Surely I was looking on at some pagan festival ! Who is this Black Virgin with the horned moon of Astarte, who holds her court among the cows ? How did she find her way to this remote village of Auvergne ?

I watched her with her attendant priests, and men, each bearing a rod, wound round with strips of coloured paper, so reminiscent of the ancient "thyrsus." I followed, as she made her tour of the fountain ; saw her enter the chapel ; stood by, while she was robed in her Vassivière garments, and placed on the pedestal above the altar.

I suppose in ancient times sacrifices would have followed—sacrifices, perhaps of slaves, certainly of cows and calves. But Christianity has done away with such scenes, and the sacrifice which followed was that of the Mass, very solemn, very simple, and in that ancient sanctuary very suggestive.

As I made my way out, I glanced up at the little black form above the altar, and wondered from what wood the image was fashioned. Was it the sacred tree of some still earlier cult, used in order to incorporate the ancient religion with its successor ? Who can say ? Succeeding religions have merged so imperceptibly into one another, that their history, even when recorded, is difficult to trace, and at Vassivière there are no records before the thirteenth century.

But there are legends, beliefs, superstitions, a cult too deeply seated to have had its origin only two thousand



LA MONTÉE DE N.D. DE VASSIVIERES

years ago. And above all there is a strange elemental atmosphere, taking one back in fancy to the days when the first Celts came wandering from the East, bringing perhaps some such image, or the sacred pillar from which was hewn the first Black Virgin of the Puy de Sancy.

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CHAPTER VI

La Tour d'Auvergne—Saint-Pardoux—Notre Dame de Natzy—Bort—The Burial of Carmankan—The Castle of Madic—The Story of Yolande—The Virgin of Champagnac—The Gorge of the Dordogne—The Castle of Ventadour—The Story of Geoffrey Tête Noir

SOME twenty miles to the west of Vassivière, may still be seen the scanty ruins of the castle of La Tour d'Auvergne, birthplace of the noble family of that name, once so notorious in French history. The keep, the nucleus of the castle, rises from a crag of black basalt, from which it would be indistinguishable, save for a certain staircase leading down into the forgotten rooms, which must still lie below. The remainder of the castle has disappeared, and the village, which once crouched humbly at foot of the mound, has ventured nearer and nearer, till to-day it reaches right up to the sides of the lofty crag, which, crowned by its ruin, still dominates the landscape.

Every one has heard of the family of La Tour d'Auvergne. As Chabrol says: "This illustrious house is allied to all the first families of Europe." If we trace it back through the long line of Bertrands, Bernards, and Girauds, as the eldest sons were named, we shall arrive, in the year 937, at Bernard de La Tour and his wife Berthilde, who "gave much wealth to the church of Brioude," in payment, no doubt, for the many sins they had committed in their youth! For, like certain other noble houses of which we read, the original Lords de La Tour began their

family career as a set of aristocratic brigands. By the fourteenth century, however, they were in high favour at court, and we hear of a Seigneur de La Tour being at the Battle of Poitiers, and dying in defence of his king.

Catherine de Médicis inherited La Tour through her mother Madeline, Lady of Auvergne, who married Laurent de Médicis, nephew of Pope Leo the Tenth. And so we come to the days when it passed into the hands of Margot, Queen of Navarre, as she is still called by the peasants, and she bequeathed it to Louis XIII., the son of her rival, thus uniting Auvergne to France.

It was about two o'clock when we entered the little place, and drew up in the shadow of the ancient keep. As we did so, an old woman accosted us, asking whether we would like to see the castle, and, on our replying in the affirmative, led us by a narrow path to the top of the ivy-covered heap of ruins. What a strange place! Here, where soldiers once fought and died, hay was lying, chickens feeding, for the old woman had constituted herself the guardian, and lived in a little shanty she had put up on the flat top of the keep.

"For eight hundred years my ancestors have lived in this village," said she, looking proudly round; "as long as the Family existed we served them, and, now that they are dead, I love to show the castle and talk of them, for I too, look you, am a little of the race of La Tour."

On hearing that we had come from Vassivière, she inquired eagerly, if we had noticed the escutcheon of the Family in the vaulting of the chapel roof, and told me how she had walked the whole distance two years before, on purpose to see it.

"And would you believe it," she concluded, "Monsieur le Curé knew nothing whatever of the matter. But there, how should he, is he one of the Family? 'Monsieur, s'il vous plaît, où sont les armes des Seigneurs de La Tour d'Auvergne?' said I. 'Pas ici, ma bonne femme, vous vous trompez. Il ne restent pas des armes de ces messieurs-là. Tout a été détruit par les Anglais.' The English, indeed, as though they would dare to destroy the arms of La Tour."

"Pardon, Monsieur le Curé, c'est vous qui vous trompez. Voilà!" With a superb gesture, she waved her hand upward to an imaginary roof. "Behold the arms, Madame! A tower, this tower on which we stand!" stamping her foot, "and five fleurs-de-lys!" with a slap of the hand for each, by way of emphasis. "And below, the motto, Madame knows it doubtless: 'Dieu et Mon Tour.' Ah," she concluded, furtively brushing away a tear, "and to think that they are all gone but me, their humble servant, old Madame d'Arfeuille!"

"D'Arfeuille?" I echoed.

"Yes, Madame," said she, drawing herself up to her full height, "my name is noble, but it is all I have, save memories. However, my sorrows are for myself. For the world I dance." And suiting the action to the word, she began dancing. It was the strangest feeling, to be sitting there on the top of the ancient keep, where the ancestors of Catherine de Médicis lived, watching the capers of this weird old creature. It might well have been the original war-dance of the early Celts, the first settlers in Auvergne, so wild it was, so passionate, and free from all restraint. As I watched Madame d'Arfeuille, with her bright eyes and quick gestures, my thoughts flew back through the centuries, to the days when, on the rock below, her

ancestors had leapt and gesticulated to the same rhythm. There were the same expressive movements, the same wild cries, the same snapping of the fingers, the same rhythmical stamping of the foot, as though she were trampling upon some fallen foe. There was even the little cup caught up, symbolical of the skull from which, in old times, the fathers of her race had drunk the warm blood of the conquered enemy. Then the dance ended, and I found myself on the old tower, with the old woman, who, as she says, is probably a "little of the family," and loves to talk of the old race she represents.

As we had not lunched, she condescended to cook us an omelette, a mighty omelette, such as one of her far-away grandmothers no doubt cooked for the brigand chief who dwelt in the tower below. And, while she beat up the nineteen eggs which formed it, she told us her story. Her son had turned her out of doors. "Go pray to the Virgin to help you!" he had said, "and if she does not hear, pray to the Devil!"

"But I had no need, Madame," she concluded; "the old castle of my ancestors opened its door to me, and here I live, half in the past, half in the present, telling stories of my Family, and cooking omelettes for travellers."

She certainly had a most wonderful collection of anecdotes, most of which I have unfortunately forgotten. The following, however, I remember: it was her account of the final destruction of the castle.

"In ancient times," thus she always began, "there were two lords of La Tour, brothers. The eldest inhabited this castle, and wishing to be rid of the younger, who was but a child, he gave him to a servant, saying: 'Take him to the forest of Corbè, la-bas! and there kill him, and be sure to bring me his tongue as a proof.' There is a secret

passage to the forest, through which they went. But having arrived there, the servant spared the boy, and killing a dog, brought its tongue, which his lord had cooked for supper."

"I have heard that story before," said I. "It is quite a common one."

"No doubt," replied the woman tranquilly, "it was always so done in the ancient times." She went on to relate that the child was adopted by some gipsies, and grew up to be a celebrated captain, who, not knowing his real name, took that of Maurevers, and served "A Lord Cardinal called Richelieu."

"One day," she continued, "Maurevers and his brother happened to meet at the inn at Saint-Pardoux, and as there was only one fowl for supper, the captain suggested that they should fight for it. But the Seigneur de La Tour was afraid, and shut himself up in his tower," with the usual stamp of the foot which accompanied any mention of the keep, "and Maurevers waited on the hill yonder where you see the statue of Our Lady. At last a prisoner who had suffered much at the hands of La Tour, sent word to the Captain that most of the castle was really built on sand, and that he must dig beneath it. So it fell, and the cruel Seigneur was carried to Riom and executed, and as Maurevers did not know that he himself was heir to the castle, he destroyed it, and later, when he found out, they say it almost broke his heart."

At foot of the hill is a tiny chapel with a Black Virgin, which was discovered by a bull digging in the earth with its hoof. Children with weak legs are taken to visit the statue, in the hope, I suppose, of their gaining some of the strength of the ox. But the real Virgin of La Tour, the

second of the Four Black Sisters of the Mont Dore, is Notre Dame de Natzy.

We had already finished the last morsel of the famous omelette, when Madame d'Arfeuille asked if we had seen the Saint, and upon our saying no, volunteered to take us.

"Have you ever been in an automobile?" I asked.

"No," said she, frowning distrustfully at the car, "but I will go"; and while we were making ready to start I saw her going from house to house, and overheard her making arrangements as to what was to happen in case of her death! Then, with the same air of grim resolve as her great "ancestor" must have worn at the Battle of Poitiers, she mounted into her place, and we set off down the steep hill.

"Let him go faster! Let him go faster!" she cried, and all the time her face was set and stern, the very model of a La Tour going to meet death. I believe she was half disappointed when we reached the church safely; it would have been a glorious fate for the last of her race! They would never have done talking about it at La Tour.

We found Saint-Pardoux, where the Virgin resides, a charming little village, with an old inn where, according to our guide, when the castle of La Tour was full the châtelaine hired rooms for supernumerary visitors!

There is an old convent too, once the home of some great noble. The nuns came out to be photographed, and loaded me with flowers from the ancient walled garden. What a place it would be to go and dream away a month! Every rose is full of some forgotten love story, and the scent of the lilies carries one's thought back to long-vanished daughters of the ancient race, who used to come and pray to the Good Mother of Natzy to send them as

gentle husbands as was compatible with those war-like days.

After Madame d'Arfeuille had told the Sisters of her amazing experience, we passed to the church, on the threshold of which she stopped me.

"Make three wishes," said she; "it is always good to do so on entering a new church."

My husband was taken to the Roman bénitier, a perfect wonder of grotesque sculpture, and bade to dip his finger, wish, and cross himself three times. "Ah!" she cried, "Quel malheur! The left hand. It might have brought you a handsome wife if you had used the right!" and she gave a wicked look at me. "The water of Natzy is miraculous," she continued. "On Palm Sunday people come for miles to fetch it, and keep it through the year."

"For the sick?" I inquired.

"For that also. But it is specially useful in case of storms. When the sky grows black and we hear the thunder growling, we take the water and sprinkle the house with it. It has never been known to fail."

"That is very useful in a mountain country like this," I said.

"Dame, oui!" exclaimed the old woman. "Why, a farmer near here built a new house not long ago, and up the chimney, if you ever heard of such madness, he put an iron rod, a thing never seen before in La Tour! You will have your house struck, I told him; but he only laughed. These men think they know everything. However, his wife was wiser, for she sprinkled the house *and* the rod with Natzy water. It was as well she did so, for about a month after, there was a most terrible storm; you would have said that Saint Michael and the Devil were at their

old tricks up above. Many houses were struck, for it is not every one in these days who believes in the water! But the new house was not touched. I myself saw the lightning strike the rod, but directly it felt the water, *wouf!* down it flashed into the ground, and almost immediately the clouds fled away to the east."

We found the dusky little statue enthroned in the north chapel, shut in by a grill through which pilgrims were evidently accustomed to make their offerings, for the ground was scattered with sous. I expressed some wonder that they were not stolen, but Madame explained that each sou represented a complaint, which would inevitably attach itself to any thief. From the legends our guide recounted, it is evident that this impersonation of the Blessed Virgin has inherited the characteristics of some goddess of thunder and fire, who was probably once worshipped on this spot, and I even wondered whether the blackness of some of these statues originated in their having been called upon to pass through the fire at the time of their annual festival. At the feet of Notre Dame de Natzy candles are blessed and kept to be lighted in time of storm or illness.

On the way back Madame d'Arfeuille was less silent than she had been on the outward journey, and told me of that great La Tour, First Grenadier of France, who died so gallantly at Neuburg in 1800.

"And even to-day, when the roll is called," she concluded, "his name is still read out: 'THÉOPHILE MALO DE LA TOUR D'Auvergne,' they cry; and a voice answers, 'DEAD ON THE FIELD OF BATTLE.' It is glorious to be so remembered!"

"I wonder what he would think of the automobile?" I remarked.

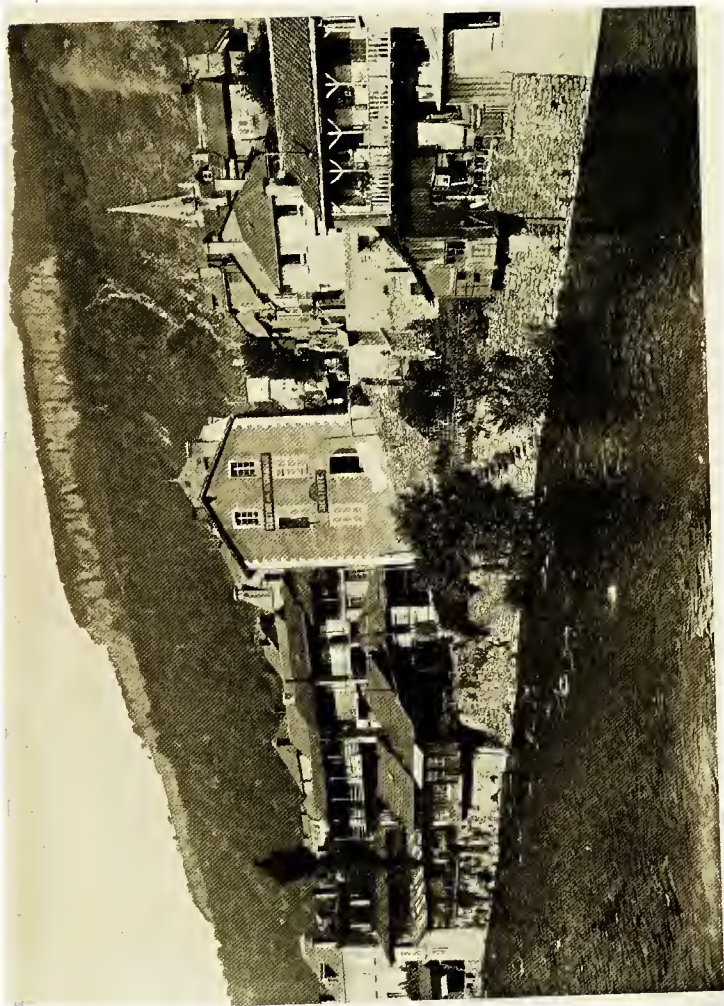
Her eyes sparkled. "Ah," said she, "if they could but see me, my ancestors."

After depositing the old lady at La Tour, where she had quite a reception, we drove on to Bort, a magnificent ride, the mountains on our left shadowed by moving clouds, and all the foreground one rich flowery pasture, now blue, now pink, now yellow, now purple, as the tribes of flowers succeeded one another. Here and there rocks would crop up, or little bouquets of feathery pine woods. And so down into the valley of the Dordogne, which we entered as the shades were darkening to night.

How many people know the little Limousine town, lying at the foot of those mighty basalt cliffs, named by a happy inspiration *Les Orgues de Bort*? It has been called the gateway to High Auvergne, and indeed it forms one of the finest centres from which to visit this part of the country. In itself it is a quaint little place, self-centred, self-reliant, self-important. There is a market once a week where you will see costumes, and hear stories, such as you had ceased to believe in before you were short-coated! Through the centre of the town rushes the Dordogne, so lately set free from the restraints of its nursery in the gorge above, that it can scarcely be regarded as a grown-up river, and curvets about in an adorable and perfectly useless fashion, for many a mile farther down the valley.

There is a curious ceremony which takes place at Bort at the commencement of Lent, which probably dates back to very early times, and is connected either with that custom spoken of by Dr Frazer in his "*Golden Bough*,"¹ known as *Burning the Old Woman*, or with some sacrifice once offered to the god of the river. It is known that

¹ Vol. iii. p. 244.



THE TOWN OF BORT FROM THE BRIDGE

when the Celtic Aryans traversed Europe with their flocks and herds, one of the greatest difficulties they had to encounter was that of crossing the rivers. In the days when they still had to be forded, the River God claimed a most exorbitant toll of both human and animal life. So at last when bridges were invented, it only seemed fair to the Celtic mind that sacrifices should be offered to the defrauded deity. And as the old people would have been the most likely to perish in fording the stream, it was they, with grim justice, who were selected as victims. As long as there have been bridges anywhere in Central France, there has been one at Bort, but whether the ceremonial which takes place on Ash Wednesday, has any connexion with the matter or not I leave to be determined by wiser heads than mine.

I am fortunate enough to have a friend at Bort, and it is to her that I owe the following account of the "Burial of Carmankan." "On Ash Wednesday about nine o'clock in the evening, a melancholy procession may be seen going through the narrow streets of Bort. On a hurdle is the straw effigy of a man, carried by boys dressed in white to resemble priests, while before and after come others bearing torches. In the red shifting light they move slowly along, singing a weird dirge-like chant, which recalls the *De Profundis*. So strange is the sight, that it is not at all unusual to see those who are unaccustomed to the ways of Bort, cross themselves fearfully. But if you listen, and above all if you understand the Limousine patois, you will not find it so terrifying.

"'Farewell, poor Carmankan,' they sing, 'you must go; I remain! Farewell, farewell, farewell!'

"From all corners of the town, men, women, and children gather to pay their last respects to Carmankan. So by

the time the procession arrives on the bridge it is quite a formidable gathering. Then the oldest man takes a torch and sets fire to the effigy. Instantly others fall upon it and cast it into the Dordogne, while the crowd takes up the refrain : ' Farewell, poor Carmankan, farewell ! ' For a few moments the flaming straw may be seen floating down the stream, leaving a sparkling wake behind ; then it dies away, and the water, having nothing more to devour, resumes its ordinary appearance, while the Bortois, having accomplished their pagan rite, go home with a feeling of religious satisfaction."

The morning after our arrival at Bort, we started off with this friend of ours, to pay a visit to the Castle of Madic. The road runs along the valley, shaded by chestnut trees and beeches, and in the rocky bed at its side rushes the turbulent young river. According to legend the Castle of Madic was built by Richard Cœur de Lion. Here they say he lived, and loved a fair maid of the district, who fell a victim to his martial charms, and it was from them that the Dukes of Madic were descended. We found the village priest in the *Place* as we drew up, and as he and my friend were old acquaintances, he went with us up the wooded mound to the ruined castle, and showed us the site of the famous well, the water of which was brought hither from Ryberolles by Bernard de Madic. So proud was he, they say, of his achievement, that when first he saw the water actually flowing within his castle walls, he shouted, " Ha, now, whether God wishes it or not, we shall have plenty of good water at Madic " ; but at the blasphemy, observed the priest piously, the castle crumbled away at his feet. Later it was rebuilt by his son, who added four great towers, which he named after four favourite saints. One, that of Saint Yves, still stands,

and in it is a dungeon where they say a lord of Madic, in the good old days before the Revolution, used to keep and starve the children of obstinate tenants, that their cries might stimulate their parents to pay his exorbitant demands. There is a loophole through which, it is said, may still be heard the little voices crying and praying for mercy.

Among the trees which crown the hill lies the castle chapel, to which the members of the family are still brought for burial. There lie the descendants of Gaillarde de Madic, last of the original race, by whose marriage the house of Madic became merged in the great family of Chabannes, so nearly related to the Counts of Angoulême and lords of Ventadour. There no doubt lies the well-known Antoine de Chabannes, who fought, as a boy, in the Hundred Years' War, and was at the Battle of Verneuil when the French were defeated. The Count of Ventadour, being wounded, had called on his young page to save himself. "Those whose name I have the honour to bear," said the boy proudly, "knew not how to fly! I have no wish to learn, neither would I begin my life in that fashion!"

It is said that the Duke of Bedford, hearing the speech, was so struck with admiration, that he sent the lad home without demanding a ransom.

But the real story of Madic, the story which is told to the children as they sit by the fire of a winter's night, happened long before the days of Antoine de Chabannes, during that prehistoric period which we designate as Once upon a time.

Once upon a time, therefore, there was a Duke of Madic named René, who had an only child called Yolande. A prodigy of beauty was Yolande, according to my friend

who told me the story. Her eyes were blue as corn-flowers, and her golden hair so long that when she went a-riding, her curls mingled with the white tail of her palfrey; so that all the young lords of Auvergne were dying for love of her. But Yolande, continuing to smile indiscriminately on them all, her father, unwilling or perhaps afraid to show a preference for any one of them, declared that he would bestow his daughter on that man who could carry her from one side of the Dordogne to the other. It was a curious test for the Duke to think of, and seems to point to the fact that the daughters of Madic were beyond the average in the matter of weight, and this is borne out by the sequel.

Then Hugues de Crozant took the fair child in his arms; but half-way across, staggering and exhausted, was obliged to deposit his precious burden in a boat which lay ready moored in the river. (Observe that evidently such an emergency was expected.) It was the same with Guy de Bort, René de Rochemaure, Roger de Ventadour, Raymond de Mauriac, and all the rest of the lovesick youths. At last there came forward the Duke's young squire, Alain, with whom Yolande had long been carrying on a secret flirtation. Every one watched and wondered as he took her in his arms. Now they are in mid stream, now nearing the other bank! But just as the Duke was, no doubt, debating whether he should break his word, or give his daughter to this insignificant squire, he saw the young man, who had set down his burden on the further bank, fall exhausted at her feet. And there they lie to-day! They look exactly like a couple of rocks, but every child at Madic knows that really, one of them is the fair but TOO TOO SOLID Yolande, and the other her faithful lover Alain, the Squire of Madic.

One of the places in Auvergne I had been most anxious to visit was the Castle of Ventadour, the scene of many thrilling episodes in the Hundred Years' War. It lies in a remote valley, about fifty kilometres to the west of Bort, among some of the grandest scenery in France.

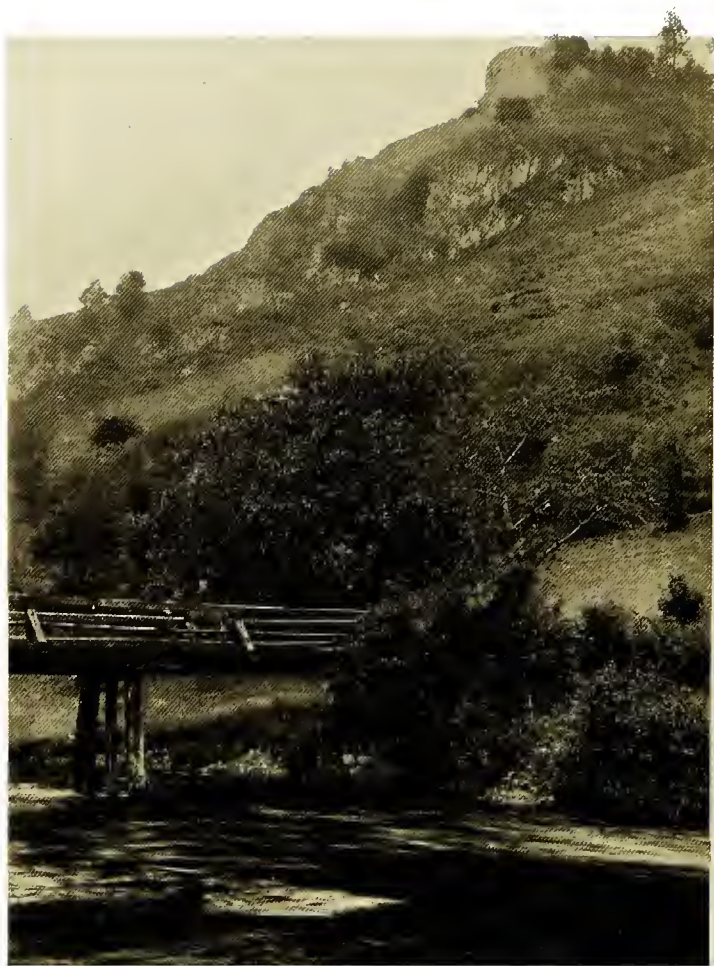
On the way we passed Champagnac, a little village where, according to the Vicar of Madic, was a very ancient statue of the Virgin. We found the church curious enough to repay us for our visit, but the statue had disappeared, and we were about to leave the village, when I saw an old woman watching us from her door. She was so much like a heathen statue herself, that I went over and questioned her. Oh yes, there *was* a saint, some said she was Saint Anne, some called her La Bonne Dame. Formerly she was to be found in the church, but at present she was residing in the house of Monsieur le Curé.

I think we must have disturbed poor Monsieur le Curé at a critical part of his sermon, for he came out still holding his pen, very red and decidedly irritable, and declared he knew nothing whatever about the statue. However, on my mentioning the Vicar of Madic, he growled out something, and calling his servant, told her in a surly way, to take us up to the attic, and there we found her. What she was like before her face decayed, it is impossible to say. The servant, who was much more agreeable and interesting than her master, told us that King Clovis gave the statue to the church, and that before the coming of Notre Dame de Lourdes it had stood above the high altar.

What a weird-looking object! Probably one of those mysterious goddesses, which the Merovingian king worshipped, before he received baptism at the hands of Saint Rémi at Reims. Like most converts, Clovis, after his conversion, was an enthusiastic son of the Church.

The Bishop had adjured him "to adore what he had formerly burned, and to burn what he had formerly adored!" and for the most part he did so, but perhaps spared this particular deity, thinking that in so remote a place as Champagnac, her pagan characteristics would go unnoticed. Possibly he may even have had a lingering regard for, or fear of her, or thought that she bore a resemblance to his wife Clothilde! there is no knowing what fancies actuated the kings of those times. At all events here she is, very ancient, very mysterious, and in spite of her Christian reputation, as pagan at heart as Clovis himself remained for all the efforts of his wife, and the saintly Bishop of Reims.

We took care not to see the priest on our way out, and were soon *en route* for Neuvic. It is a wonderful road, rather too wonderful for me, whose nerves are none of the strongest. Shortly after leaving Champagnac, which lies high on a sort of tableland, we began plunging down into the gorge of the Dordogne. No words can describe its grandeur. Before us opened a yawning gulf, down whose rocky precipitous sides, a zigzag path led in and out among dark and spreading trees, to the glittering foaming river below. I have negotiated some exciting roads in my time, but never one like this; and though I remember it, it is by flashes, caught as our front wheels were hesitating on the brink of nothingness! Once for a moment, as we were crossing the suspension-bridge which hangs like a spider's thread from cliff to cliff, I had time to breathe and look around. We were in the depths of the mighty cañon, which the Dordogne has cut, and is still cutting through the heart of the mountains, and all the air was full of the roar and tumult of the turbulent tossing waters. Then the car reached the farther bank, and began turning and twisting up the cliffs like a fly. Gradually as we rose higher, the



THE CASTLE OF VENTADOUR

sound of the torrent died away, beech and chestnut gave place to oak and fir, till presently we found ourselves high up among dwarfish shrubs and purple heather, the air full of the buzz of insects, and the sweet breath of pinks and wild thyme. The gorse was still in flower, over it the mountain spiders had hung what the peasants call "*Jetons de la Bonne-Ange*," which in the sunshine sparkled like a jewelled veil. Now an eagle is flapping his great curved wings above us.—But just as I am beginning to recover a little, and enjoy the comparative security of the road, we drop into another valley, and the way leads us through a network of gorges.

Suddenly, on turning a corner, high up in the sky, an enormous crag, and on the crag, Ventadour! I had never pictured the castle, but I knew it directly I saw it. Who but Geoffrey Tête Noir would have set his heart on such a place! who but he would ever have been able to capture it? For a time we lost sight of it again, and the road began climbing, climbing. Then all at once we emerged on a ledge of rock, and there, just opposite, still towering above us, and separated from us by a deep and narrow chasm, was the castle.

Leaving the car to take care of itself, we scrambled down to the river, and swarmed up the rocky path to the fortress which hangs above it like an eagle's nest.

As we neared the outer door, I almost expected to find it barred against us, and even as we emerged from the steep and narrow passage leading into the courtyard, one instinctively looked around for the brigands Alleyn Roux and his brother Peter, and all the rest of the terrible band. But inside the walls all was silent and empty. It is still possible, with a little imagination, to make out the plan of the castle. There is the great carved chimney-piece

beside which the old Count of Ventadour-Montpensier was no doubt peacefully dreaming his after-dinner dreams, when Pons du Bois, his treacherous squire, opened the gate to that most cruel of Bretons, Geoffrey Tête Noir. Through this doorway the good Count and his family were expelled, no doubt thinking themselves happy in being allowed to take their lives to their other castle of Montpensier, hard by Aigueperse.

Then what wild doings began at Ventadour! Geoffrey and his Companions, as they styled themselves, kept possession, ravaging the country, and taking all the strongest castles one after another. Among the band was a certain Limousine squire, by name Amerigot Marché, of whom we shall hear more anon. At last things came to such a pass, that the French under Sir John Bonne-lance, of whom we have already heard, set out to besiege Ventadour. The crag, so inaccessible from the front, stretches back in a narrow isthmus, connecting it with the high land which closes in the valley. Here, and down by the stream, the French erected blockhouses. But Geoffrey only laughed, for he knew that the castle could not be taken by storm, and was provisioned for seven or eight years. Just to pass the time, however, he and his friends used to go out for a skirmish now and then, and it was during one of these fights that the Chief was wounded in the head. As I sat looking at the keep clasped in the knotted arms of the ancient ivy, I began wondering how they dragged the wounded man up the twenty-foot ladder, which gave access to the entrance. For it was in the donjon that the commander had his rooms.

I pictured that strange death scene, when, calling all his associates together, the dying man appointed his successors and made his will.

"The sum I have mentioned," he concluded, "you will find in that chest : divide it therefore among you fairly and honourably, for you should behave like brothers, without riot or strife. But should the Devil get among you, and you cannot agree, here is a well-tempered sharp axe : break open the chest, and in God's Name let those who can, seize the contents !"

As we wandered about the ruins, I found many interesting relics of the past : the oven where the poor, wild, faithful creature who passed as Geoffrey's wife, baked his bread ; a door opening over a precipice, most convenient for an unwelcome guest, who had supped too well to see his way very clearly to his bedroom. But we searched in vain for any sign of Geoffrey's tomb. The site of the Chapel of Saint George may still be traced, but the centuries have piled their debris of moss and fallen stones over the pavement, so that nothing remains of Geoffrey Tête Noir but the old Chronicle.

We found something to eat at a tiny village, lying back on the isthmus, where the French blockhouses were once erected ; and as we munched the sausage and bread, Veuve Lautrec, who kept the little restaurant, waited on us while her old mother dozed in the chimney. No doubt they had the blood of the bandits in their veins, but it must have grown honest with time, for they charged us a most ridiculous sum, and insisted on wrapping up the remains of the feast in an old bit of newspaper, for us to take with us !

Either my nerves had been upset with the visit to Geoffrey Tête Noir, or else the road was even more appalling when taken in the reverse direction. It seemed almost impossible for the car to turn safely round the little hairpin twists. Suddenly one would come face to face with nothing but a jump into the yawning chasm. Then we

would swing safely round, and for a moment one breathed ; but only for a moment. Again and again the same thing happened, till I began to get used to it, and almost enjoyed the excitement of the momentary look into the face of death. At last I took no notice of the turns, and when we passed the viaduct, and began the safe upward climb, it seemed quite tame. But how splendid was the view. In the depths, the river, its swift stream broken into foam, singing, dancing over the rocks. On either hand basalt cliffs overgrown with verdure, and beyond, far up in the wild regions where the river takes its rise, the purple hills of the Mont Dore.

It was a long long way to Condat, but we reached it at last, and found the little town full of soldiers, a company from Le Puy having taken possession of it. They were very merry over dinner, and we thought we should probably have a disturbed night, but by nine o'clock every man was in bed ; and as I looked out of my window to say good night to the moon, sailing high over the solemn mountains, I could hear nothing but the grasshoppers, and the stealthy brush of a bat's wing as he hurried past.



THE VALLEY OF THE RHUE NEAR CONDAT

CHAPTER VII

Condat—Riom-ès-Montagne—The Castle of Apchon—La Font Sainte—Saint Hippolyte—Cheylade and Saint-Léger—Dienne

NEXT morning we were awakened early by the sound of bugles. The soldiers were going off. From behind my curtains I watched them start, at their short quick march, so different from that of the English. Evidently a good many had fallen out the day before, for the ambulances were full. Beside them, like death, rode the doctor on his white horse!

Though the sun had not yet reached Condat, it sparkled so gaily on the hills, that we were tempted to make an early start. But though we were early, the inn was earlier still, for there was much cleaning to be done after the soldiers' visit. Every copper pot and pan had been moved out into the street, the portable boilers were steaming in the yard, Géraud was already in the midst of his day's work polishing the floor of the *salle à manger*, while the passages upstairs were so piled with sheets and dirty pillow-cases, that they were almost impassable.

Auvergne is a country of extremes so far as its roads are concerned: if one is not climbing a mountain, one is rushing down into a gorge. This morning the way led steeply upward, so that soon, from the sunny heights we looked down into bosky depths, still full of the shadows of night. I imagine it was like the contemplation of one's past life after reaching Paradise. Instinctively I drew a long breath full of the perfume of flowers, and the joy

of living. Everywhere the ground was golden with shepherd's purse, so that we seemed to have sunshine below as well as above. Soon we came upon the village of Saint-Amandin, where haymakers were already at work.—But I cannot take you mile by mile to Riom-ès-Montagne, you would be more tired than I should. We reached it when the day was still young, a little old-world town, lying in a long, shallow, flat-bottomed valley, surrounded by mountain summits.

We had been afraid to pass the night at the Hôtel de la Roche, not finding it starred in the guide-book, but it is quite an excellent place. While waiting for lunch, we strolled over to the church, which is finely sculptured inside and out, with very extraordinary and interesting capitals to the heavy Roman pillars. The whole of this district of Cantal, was in 733 overrun by hordes of Arabs, who left their trace on some of the names of the district. It seems that after the Infidels had been defeated at Poitiers by Charles Martel, some of them, on their way southward, took refuge among the mountains of Auvergne, even penetrating to these wild districts of Cantal. They were, however, soon dislodged, and close to Riom there is a stream called Ruisseau des Sarrasins, where I was assured they were brought, just as the priests of Baal were brought to the Brook Kedron by Elijah, and there slaughtered. And since that time nothing has happened at Riom-ès-Montagne, save that in 1588 the plague paid it a visit and carried off most of the inhabitants. But that was so usual an occurrence in those days, that it is scarcely worth mentioning.

We had one of those excellent early lunches, or breakfasts, for which Auvergne is famous. The cheese, in particular, was delicious. Every commune has its special

cheese, and that of Riom is noted throughout Cantal. It is a kind of creamy curd, and to see it eaten as it should be eaten, you should go to the Hôtel de la Roche on a market day, and lunch with the farmers. We were already hard at work, when there entered a sturdy fellow in a curious cloak of stripped blanket, made like a double petticoat, gathered at the neck, and furnished with a broad scarlet collar. It was the first time I had seen the Limousine, which is nevertheless the usual cloak of the men of Cantal, and is said by some to be the direct descendant of the Celtic "sagum." With a comprehensive nod to the table, the man, after disrobing, came and took his seat beside me. He had a round head, merry eyes, and shaved on Sundays. This was Saturday! He seemed to know every one, and there was much talk of cows, pigs, and the low price cheese was fetching, and how everything was going to Le Vilain, by whom they meant the Devil, though they seemed to take it fairly cheerfully, as the Cantalien takes everything. And all the time we sipped our wine, and cracked our hard biscuits, so that a noise went round the table as though a steam roller were crunching flints on a macadam road.

Presently some one called out to my neighbour: "Well! Pierre, and how about Blaise? Is he still at his tricks?"

"No, no!" replied the man seriously. "That is finished, Dieu soit loué!"

There was a sudden movement of attention. Evidently the tricks of Blaise were well known.

"It was Monsieur le Curé who found out what was the matter," pursued Pierre. "Ah, it is not for nothing they go to college, these priests!"

"But tell us . . ."

"You know how Blaise loved his land during his lifetime?"

"Oh, he was a farmer; none better! But too close, look you! Do you remember that time he broke off his son's match with Madeline Raulhac for the sake of fifty francs?"

A murmur of assent went round the table.

"Yes," said Pierre, shaking his head. "He was too close, that was the beginning of it."

"Hé! Hé! Tell us!" and the round heads came forward, and all the merry eyes were fixed on Pierre, while one man filled up the narrator's glass to assist him in his narrative.

"You've heard how he's been seen walking about the farm ever since his death? It got so bad that every one was afraid to go near the place after nighfall. So they asked Monsieur le Curé to bring the Blessed Water. You may believe there were many watching for Blaise next evening!"

"Did he come?" the question was breathed rather than spoken.

The farmer paused, and took a drink before replying.

"Yes," said he slowly, "he came. You know the field which lies alongside Jean Dubuisson's land? It was there Blaise always grew his finest wheat. Well, from the boundary wall came cries, groans! Then they saw Blaise, at least Monsieur le Curé did, and what do you think he was doing?"

He had broken up several biscuits into jagged fragments, which, as he continued, he used to illustrate the story.

"He was moving the stones of the boundary wall backward, backward, so! on to the land which had been

his. And all the time he kept crying: "I enlarged my fields at the expense of my neighbour! Cursed am I, in that I removed my neighbour's landmarks! No man observed me, but on high all is known, and nothing is forgotten! Woe is me! Ah, woe is me!"

"And did you see the stones move?" I asked, very much interested. Pierre turned and regarded me keenly.

"I was not there," said he, "I had gone to the fair at Murat. But my sister's husband's mother told me you could smell the roasting of his flesh, for the stones were red hot!"

This district of Cantal is simply teeming with legends. Every rock has some story to tell. Either the Devil threw it at some one, or it tumbled out of the apron of La Bonne Ange, as she went spinning through the fields of heaven. The fountains foretell the future as surely as the fountains of ancient Greece, and the lakes are haunted by white fairies or Fades, who spin in the moonlight as busily as the Fates used to spin of old. In fact all the Celtic legends appear in Auvergne, as they do in Brittany, Wales, and Ireland, only here in Cantal, they are modified by the quaint humour which characterizes the people. For the Auvergnat dearly loves fun, and many of the stories he tells you are merely a series of practical jokes, in which the Devil plays a prominent part. In the little villages, and lonely farms of Cantal, Georget, as he is sometimes familiarly and derisively called, in memory of the defeat he received at the hands of Saint George, is a very real person, and everybody you meet can tell of some village hero, who has had an encounter with the Prince of Darkness. As usual the Devil is always represented as

coming off second best, the folk-tales being chiefly concerned with the ingenious methods employed in defeating the enemy, whose intellect to tell the truth is not of the highest order!

I have heard and read so many of these Devil stories, that I might write a whole book about them. But of all the places connected with the Evil One, Apchon seems to have been the centre. I shall never forget my first view of the Castle of Apchon. On leaving Riom the road climbs steeply, forming at last a cornice on the precipitous mountain side, and just where the rocks tower most abruptly, we saw high above us on a basalt crag, the phantom of a castle. There it stood against the sky, glaring down upon us, with its sightless windows. Even on that bright July midday, it was a weird enough object; but on a winter's night, when the moon is shining through the rents left by war and time, it must be enough to make the stoutest heart afraid. No wonder that it is haunted, the favourite resort of that Devil who, probably, symbolizes all the tyranny and cruelty of the terrible "Comptours" who once dwelt there.

The Barons who bore this title of "Comptours" were the first lords of High Auvergne, and special privileges belonged to them.

Under the Feudal System the King of France was of course merely the overlord of the other mighty lords, from whom he received various tributes, and the service of themselves and their vassals in time of war. But when the Crusades began this was found insufficient, and in 1145, Louis VII., anxious to join the holy war preached by Saint Bernard, levied on every one a general tax of a tenth of their income; and thus began the King's revenue, properly so called. It was the duty of the lords of Apchon to see



THE CASTLE OF APCHON

that this money was forthcoming, a duty from which they derived their title of Comptours.

We had stopped instinctively as we came face to face with the castle, and were sitting gazing up at it in wonder and awe, when an old woman, with an immense goitre, came past, and accosted us with that curious need for entering into conversation, which distinguishes the peasant of Cantal, a need to which I owe much. "It is the first time the gentlefolk have seen the castle?" she asked. I nodded.

"Do you know who was the first lord?" pursued the woman.

"His name was Amblard," I replied, for I had learned so much from a copy of Chabrol I had found at Riom.

"Ah," said the woman, "the books say that, do they? Take my word for it, Madame, the first lord of Apchon, the father of all the rest, was the Devil himself, who lived in the Pré de la Guerre down yonder."

This was something quite new to me.

"And how did the Devil come there?"

And then she told me the following story. I hope my readers will not think the phraseology irreverent. The peasants of Cantal have a curiously familiar way of speaking of such things.

"One day the Good God was holding His court in Paradise, when before Him came Saint Michael and the Devil.

"'He has been listening at the door, this robber of souls!' cried the saint.

"'Racca!' said the demon scornfully. And then began the fight. It was a great battle. They say that the blows of their swords were louder than thunder, and the sparks they struck brighter than the lightning. First Saint

Michael was wounded, which made him so angry that he struck out with his arm, and hit his enemy in the eye. Then the Devil, not able to look where he was going, stepped back on to a cloud, and so fell out of heaven. You may picture to yourself whether the angels were pleased or not! No one loves the Devil.

"'Well struck, Michael!' cried Monseigneur Saint Peter, who had stepped up from the gate to watch the combat, 'well struck! You have done for him this time!'

"But he was mistaken. The Devil was not dead. He has as many lives as a cat. He fell into that field down there, and an evil day it was for Apchon."

I give the story, which I have since come across elsewhere, thinking that it is possibly the peasants' account of the origin of those lords of Apchon who, for so long, tyrannized over the district. It is also of course a Cantal version of the triumph of Saint Michael over Satan.

It was a very steep path up to the castle, but when we reached the ruins the view fully repaid us. Just below the base of the outer wall, in a fissure of the basalt, is the fountain, which they say sprang up when the hoof of the mule, bearing the relics of Saint Mary to Mauriac, struck it. From the ruined windows we could look straight down into the automobile, for the castle actually overhangs the road, so that in old times nothing could go by unchallenged. Truly it must have been a dangerous route. How often have not these rocks resounded to the Apchon war-cry, "HAUT ET CLAIR!" as the brigand chief and his men swooped down on their prey!

Over one of the doors, I thought I could descry the arms imposed on Amblard d'Apchon, in memory of his crimes, a

cross, two gold coins, with an axe on one side, and a nun on the other. Every one at Apchon knows the story of Amblard, the wicked Comptour, who ran away with a nun and was pursued by Robert the Pious ; who, as punishment for the sacrilege, confiscated the Comptour's lands, and gave them to his cousin Guillaumen Brunel. But Amblard was not the man to bear such treatment, and shortly afterward chancing to meet his cousin at a wedding, picked a quarrel with him, and before any one could interfere, slew him with a battle-axe. Later his conscience seemed to have reproached him, possibly he was growing old, and feared being claimed by his immortal ancestor, who still dwelt in the *Pré de la Guerre* ! We hear of a journey to Rome, and a visit to Pope Silvester the Second, himself a man of Cantal. Having confessed his faults, Amblard received absolution, on the understanding that he made over a portion of his estates to the Abbey of Cluny, from whom ever afterwards the Comptours of Apchon held them.¹ What became of the nun I never heard. But there are so many stories of the kind told of this "Don Juan," that one more or less makes little difference.

The village of Apchon lies hidden away behind the basalt cliff on which the Castle stands, and is a most captivating place. The ancient houses form three sides of the rectangular *Place*, at the end of which is the church, seeming as though it were sinking into the ground with age. But it is the colour of its roofs which so distinguishes Apchon. They are covered thick with lichen, and never have I seen such flaming shades of yellow, orange, and brown. And over all towers the great rock, from which the castle continues to watch everything that goes on in the village.

¹ See chap. x.

After passing Apchon the road grows more and more wild and savage. Stopping once or twice to ask our way, we found that most of the people spoke only the curious patois which so puzzles the traveller. They did not understand when I inquired for Saint-Hippolyte, which, I found later, is known here as Saint-Chipogui.

This little village lies quite hidden among the mountains of Cantal. The church, which is very ancient, is dedicated to the Christian impersonation of Hippolytus, son of Theseus. You remember the story of the Saint? He incurred the anger of the Emperor Decius by his devotion to the martyr Saint Lawrence, whom he finally buried. Just as he and his household were gathered around the altar to celebrate the Funeral Mass, or Feast of the Dead, as it probably was, in rushed the soldiers to arrest him. All the members of his family were beheaded, but Hippolytus himself, as befitted one of his name, was tied by the feet to two wild horses, and dragged about over the stones and rocks, till he was torn and broken in pieces. But even as his pagan prototype was restored to life by Artemis, and honoured in the Grove of Aricia; so was the Christian Hippolytus raised up by the Blessed Virgin, and is honoured, among many other places, in this little village of High Auvergne.

Our Lady of La Font Sainte, another of the Black Sisters of the Mountains of Auvergne, resembles her relative of Vassivière, in that she has her summer and her winter home. After passing nine months of the year in the Church of Saint-Hippolyte; on the second of July, the Feast of the Visitation, she starts at eight in the morning for the mountains. Everything I have said of "LA MONTÉE" of Our Lady of Vassivière is equally true of her sister of Font Sainte. The pilgrims flock from far and near.

The honour of acting as her living impersonation, or in other words of being the Queen of "La Montée" (though it has lost its first significance, and become merely a question of bearing the statue), is still put up to auction, and eagerly bid for.

If for any cause the procession is not formed, the statue travels up by itself. Many of the characteristics of this Black Virgin point to the fact that she is descended from some nature goddess, once worshipped on the mountain. Even the priest will tell you, as he told me, that the fountain was probably a sacred Druidical spring, which the Church of Christ transformed, placing it under the protection of Mary. As he truly remarked, it is quite common for a new religion to allow its converts to retain some of their old superstitions and practices, and as for the statue itself, it is well known that from time immemorial a virgin goddess has presided over these sacred fountains.

Auvergne has always been peculiarly devoted to the service of the Virgin. "Notre Dame de Haute Auvergne ! Marie, Reine d'Auvergne ! Regina Arvernîæ !" As has been well said, "She reigns from Aurillac to Clermont, holding the castles under Her sceptre, guarding the towns, the monasteries, the hamlets. She governs this country, of which Her Son Jesus is King, for its own well-being, and the splendour and glory of France." But we must not lose sight of the fact that all these ancient worshipping-places were in use long before the days when the Blessed Virgin found Her way to Auvergne ; and it is possible that here on the mountain was adored a Gaulish impersonation of Artemis, just as the village below was probably associated with the memory of some hero corresponding with Hippolytus.

The priest of Saint-Hippolyte is certainly one of the pleasantest persons to be met with in Auvergne. We found him in his little study, a young man with red hair and delightful easy manners. These priests certainly fulfil one of the apostolic injunctions, they "use hospitality without grudging," and the Grève de Bordeaux he gave us was simply delicious. But good as it was, the suggestion he made, of himself taking us up to the chapel, was better. Just as we were starting we were joined by a stout individual, who turned out to be a native of Saint-Hippolyte, who had settled as a cloth merchant at Lyon, and returned every year to spend a month among his mountains. On the way up he walked with my husband, and I with the priest, who put me through a regular catechism concerning the forms and ceremonies of our National Church.

"Are most of the English, Christians?" he asked. I replied that they were, adding that there were even among them many Catholics, though I myself belonged to the Church of England.

"Oh," he exclaimed politely, "but you cannot help that! No doubt you were so educated. Besides, the Protestants of England are different from those of France, they take their religion *au sérieux*. I am told they even keep a Holy Day, though on Saturday instead of Sunday."

"No," said I, "Sunday is our Holy Day, just as in France."

Up went his hands in apology. "A thousand pardons!" he cried; "I always confuse Jews and Protestants."

He went on to ask about our form of baptism, and whether our marriages took place in church; and here I had my revenge, for I told him we did not have to go

to the "Mairie," that with us the religious service was considered sufficient, at which he seemed thoughtful.

Presently he began telling me about the mountain, pointing out the height still known as the Camp des Anglais, where the Roi des Pillards, Amerigot Marché, and his bandits established themselves in the fourteenth century, to the great distress of the country. Their prime object in coming this way, was to take the Castle of Apchon, where Guillaume, Captain of the Mountains of Auvergne, had entrenched himself. But in this they failed, and the priest showed me a dolmen called "La Tombe à l'Anglais, which he said marked the grave of a captain who fell in single combat, under the sword of the Seigneur d'Estang, one of the Comptour's allies.

The original Christian sanctuary of La Font Sainte was destroyed during the Wars of Religion, and for many years the spot was left desolate. Pilgrims, however, continued to visit the fountain, till at last in 1743 a poor woman, one Marie Galvain, while engaged in prayer, saw a vision. Before her, on the margin of the pool, stood a tall, beautiful, and richly dressed lady.

"Marie," said the apparition, "I was once honoured on this mountain, but to-day my oratory is desolate. I charge you, raise for me a chapel, on the spot where you shall find a stone marked with the sacred sign." And there it stands! Just below, sheltered by a stone canopy, is the fountain, and an ancient group representing the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, which, according to the priest, was brought from the East by some Crusader, most likely one of the Lords of Apchon. But the original statue, said to have been given to the chapel by Saint Louis, has disappeared. I saw the stone on which it was set down on its arrival: on it a cross has been planted. Before the chapel door

lies that other mysterious stone, mentioned by the Virgin when indicating the site of the sanctuary. And on the edge of the fountain, is the stone on which the sacred feet of the apparition rested. In fact the whole place seems connected with the cult of sacred stones. The very fountain is said to have been called forth by three blows struck on the rock by the Virgin, and is used by the people of Cantal with just the same confidence as their ancestors felt in the time of the Druids.

After visiting the interior of the chapel, where above the altar stands the successor of Saint Louis' statue, we turned to make our way down to Saint-Hippolyte. On the descent we changed partners, I walking with the stout cloth merchant, who regaled me with a number of hunting stories, and told me of a wolf he had seen on the mountain, when he was eleven years old. Later it was blown out of its den with dynamite, or so he declared, and the head sold for a hundred francs. I was told by this man, that in winter there are still wolves to be found round Saint-Hippolyte, and that the head of a she-wolf will fetch as much as a hundred and twenty-five francs.

As we set off toward Cheylade, I asked my husband what he had been talking about, and found that the priest had put him through exactly the same catechism as I had undergone, for the purpose, I suppose, of comparing our answers, and ascertaining whether we spoke the truth.

At Cheylade there is a large and ancient church dedicated to Saint Léger, the well-known Bishop of Autun, friend of Queen Bethilde, widow of Clovis II. The story of his martyrdom is worth telling, as throwing some light on the manners of those times. Having incurred the hatred of

the tyrant Ebroïn, who was filling the country with blood and misery, the old bishop found himself and his town of Autun besieged by his enemy. Knowing that if the inhabitants fell into the hands of this murderer they would all be butchered, the old man without a moment's hesitation went and gave himself up. His eyes were torn out, the bleeding orbits burned with hot irons, yet not a cry did he utter! Then the tyrant ordered him to be cast into a forest and left to starve. One of the executioners, however, converted by the sight of his bravery, spared him. Yet he had better have let him die, for he was again taken, and this time the accounts of his tortures are so terrible that I cannot repeat them. One of the least was the tearing out of his tongue, which gave opportunity for an extraordinary miracle, as the saint immediately afterwards took the opportunity of preaching a long sermon, which converted most of his hearers!

But at Cheylade the saint's legend runs as follows. There has always stood in the church a very old statue of Léger, which is supposed to have great influence over the weather. At one time the people of the district who used to come and pray to the saint for rain, or vice versa, were accustomed to make offerings of food, offerings which were much appreciated by Monsieur le Curé and the Sacristan. Now, one wet summer, though the saint's help was sought as eagerly as ever, he seemed to turn a deaf ear, for the rain continued to pour in torrents, till the crops were in danger of being washed completely away. One or two of the farmers therefore put their heads together. "If he will not work, he shall not eat!" said they, and provisions began to fall off. The Curé only laughed; but the Sacristan took the matter more seriously. One evening, just as the bell-ringer, an innocent, was about to

close the church, he heard a voice coming from the direction of the statue.

"Ignace," it said, "I am hungry! No one comes to feed me. Take me out to the woods that I may eat the blackberries!"

Terrified, the man fell on his face, and the Sacristan, who had hidden himself behind the pedestal, took the opportunity to slip out. At last seeing that nothing more happened, the bell-ringer rose, raised the statue on his shoulders, carried it to the Bois-Mary, and set it up among some blackberry bushes. Next morning there was great consternation when the Sacristan announced that, no doubt owing to the scandalous neglect of his people, the saint had departed. He was searched for everywhere, and at last found, lying flat on his face, his mouth covered with blackberry juice.

Of course it was a miracle! So a procession was formed, and the good saint was carried back in triumph to his chapel, and his fame spread far and wide, so that offerings poured in in such abundance, that even the bell-ringer got a share!

The true story and the popular legend seem to have little in common, save that in both the saint is taken out into the woods, is condemned to starvation, and his face discoloured, in one case by blood, in the other by blackberry juice!

There is perhaps no road in France so magnificent as that we traversed after leaving Cheylade. In winter it is impassable owing to the snow, which fills up the great gorges, and leaves the jagged mountains smooth and rounded as our own South Downs. Even in summer it is

so wild and lonely, that few persons traverse it. Upward and upward it leads, till passing between the summits of Puy Mary, and Roc de la Tourte Puy, it enters a gorge covered with sombre trees, and scored by innumerable waterfalls. Here we found solitary "burons," the little farms where the cheeses are made, where the cowherd and his assistant pass four months of every year, cut off from their fellow-men, buried between the sky and the mountain. What a life! No wonder that if you happen to stop and ask your way of them, they will try and keep you talking as long as possible. But they are generally very hard to understand, though if you can make them out, you will hear enough weird stories of "Dracs" and sorcerers, to make you impatient of reaching your destination before dusk.

At Dienne, on the rock called Laqueille, once stood a temple to Diana, from whom the little town still takes its name. Charlemagne, it is said, destroyed the building, and with the débris built a castle to defend the pass against the Saracens. Now, castle and temple alike have disappeared, but there is a wonderful old Byzantine church, carved outside with the strangest figures, and within you will find another Virgin, who has replaced the virgin goddess once worshipped on almost the same spot. It was growing dusk as we ran through Castel, with its church perched high above. Before us, on the rock Bonnevie, where once stood the castle of the Seigneurs of Murat, we saw looming the giant statue of Notre Dame which ever watches over the town. What a hill! Down, down we sink, lower and lower; all the climbing of the day reversed in a single descent! At last, on turning a corner, we come upon the town, its tall grey roofs and many turrets crouching against the mountain side.

Already lights are gleaming from some of the windows, and the sound of a merry-go-round comes up from the Place de la Boucherie, together with the solemn clang of bells ringing the "Angelus" in the old lead-covered tower of the Church of Notre Dame des Oliviers.

CHAPTER VIII

Murat—Notre Dame des Oliviers—The Butchers of Murat—Bredons—The Bridge of Bredons—Saint-Mary-le-Cros—Brioude—The Story of Louis Raimbaut and the Limousin—The Castle of La Mothe—Old Brioude—The Legend of Saint Julien—The Story of the Bridge—The Legend of Saint Bonnite

LIKE many of the towns of Cantal, the history of Murat begins with the arrival of the first Christian missionary. He was called Antonin, and was a disciple of Saint Austremoine of Clermont, like him sent forth by Saint Peter to Christianize Gaul. In the side of a hill to the east of Murat you may still see his hermitage, with traces of the ancient paintings which once covered the inner walls, and a niche where, according to tradition, he set up a statue of the Virgin.

What a charming place is this Murat ! No town I have visited has such a sense of the mountains. There they stand, in a mighty circle, the ancient craters, just as, according to the legend given by Arsène Vermeuouse, they sank down at the word of God, these devils whose horns still protrude from the grass which has grown over their sleeping bodies. And in the midst, like a cone newly risen from the depths of the earth, is the steep rock Bonnevie.

The castle which once crowned the height was destroyed in 1633 by the wrecker of strong places, Richelieu ; but the black basaltic columns are so strangely symmetrical, that it is not difficult to picture Murat still dominated by the

impregnable fortress which the English, under Sir Robert Knollys, in 1360, stormed in vain.

And over all, where once from the Dragon Tower, or the Tower of the White Rat, the beautiful Hélis of Murat watched for the coming of her husband, Bertrand de Cardailhac, stands the enormous statue of Our Lady of Auvergne, guarding the town from the mountains which, piled up behind, seem as though they might fall upon and crush it. Below, climbing up the cliff, and spreading out fanwise into the plain, is the town, with its narrow, winding streets and heavy gables.

We had finished dinner, and were playing a game of poker patience, much to the delight of the landlady and the head waiter, when looking down I saw something black and shiny on the floor. It moved! Horror! A beetle! They say that every one has some special aversion; mine is the homely cockroach! In a moment I was standing on my chair, shaking out my skirts! How amused they were!

"Why, madam," cried the landlady, when she could speak for laughing, "it is only a 'cafard'! They have their processions across the floor every night, just like Christians. Come, my little Pierre!" and stooping, she let the disgusting beast crawl over her hand! This was too much, and we strolled out and found our way up to the Place de la Boucherie. There was no difficulty, for the raucous music of the merry-go-round was permeating every corner of the town. In the little square, booths had been set up, and the naphtha lamps were flaring among gaudy glass and crockery, and still gaudier sweetmeats. Here was a little theatre, where you were invited to go in and see the "Old Man of the Mountain," the "Fat Woman," a "Living Skeleton," while there, a "Cheap Jack" was yelling out



LA PLACE DE LA BOUCHERIE, MURAT

praises of a patent medicine. There were two merry-go-rounds, each playing a different tune, and trying to drown its rival! In fact, all the fun of the fair was going on.

My husband, persuaded by a tall gipsy to try his luck at the shooting-gallery, was quickly hemmed in by a double wall of swarthy ruffians, who watched, with ever-increasing respect, as he brought down the swinging pipe and other objects.

For me, I stood by, half stunned by the harsh discordant music, and thinking of the time, not so very long ago, when this clean little square reeked with the refuse of the butchers, and the smell was so horrible, that in 1693, the plague was attracted by it, and paid Murat a visit. So many people died, they say, that they had to give up ringing the "passing bell" for fear of terrifying those who were left.

The butchers of Murat have always formed a distinct caste. Even to-day, a man does not *become* a butcher; like a poet, he is born to the trade. The whole clan lives in a special quarter in the very shadow of the church, the members being, in their way, as exclusive as the German Royal Family, for no butcher ever thinks of marrying out of his own trade, or bringing up his son to any other. They have their own customs, their own special dialect, and are most tenacious about the preservation of all their old traditions. They still live grouped around this little square, which bears their name, and there on the second of February, the Feast of the Purification, they hold a wonderful ceremony.

It was Sister Marie-Ange, the aunt of my friend at Bort, who told me all about it. We called upon her next morning, at the convent beside the church. She seemed

delighted to see us, asking a thousand questions about her niece, our journey, our impressions of Murat, and finally, as it was Sunday, marched us off to church, where I sat gazing up at the black-robed, black-faced statue of the Virgin of Murat. Of all the Black Virgins I have seen, this is the blackest. Her sable robes are indeed trimmed with ermine, royally, as befits the "Queen of the Mountains," but for the rest, she is black as night, black as ink, black as the proverbial Erebus, black as the blackest thing you can think of, black as the Moors, who left their name impressed on the town Murat.

After Mass we approached the altar, and Sister Marie-Ange told me how the lamps before the statue of this "Olive of the Fields" must always be filled with pure olive oil, or they will instantly go out. She told me also, how, in 1493, the church had been struck by lightning, and burned to the ground. Everything was consumed, yet there, in the midst of the ashes, where the fire had waxed fiercest, they found the statue of Notre Dame des Oliviers, blackened by the smoke and flame, yet unconsumed.

"You must come to Murat on the second of February," said Sister Marie-Ange, "then you will see Our Good Mother in all her glory, crowned, and wearing her green robe of state."

"Green?" said I. "Surely you mean blue."

But the Sister assured me that the colour of the Virgin of Murat was green. The priests who carry the statue wear green dalmatiques. When a child is vowed to Our Lady of the Olives he is dressed in green. And when a young girl is received as a *Congréganiste* she is invested with the Green Ribbon. All this interested me very much, so, finding me a ready listener, the good lady went on to

tell me about the festival of the Purification. It seems that for some reason or other the butchers of Murat consider that the statue belongs in an especial manner to them, and their reverence for it is unbounded. For eight days before the feast the bells are rung to announce the coming ceremony. On the day itself, immediately after the Benediction of the Candles, the statue is placed on a carrier, and four young butchers, decked in their gayest costumes, carry it out to an altar which has been raised in the Place de la Boucherie. Then all the men, women, and children of the fraternity crowd round to kiss the hem of the green robe, and drop offerings into the bag which hangs from the neck of the image. And when all is finished, back she is borne in state to the church, and set in her niche on the north side of the high altar.

As I listened to the good sister's description of the ceremony, all manner of wild thoughts assailed me. What was the origin of these butchers of Murat, who dwell apart, and never marry out of their own clan? We know that during the Middle Ages it was the cagots or lepers who slaughtered the animals, just as they were the rope-makers, and carpenters of the community. They were outcasts in those days, forbidden to mix with their fellow-men. Is it possible that there is any connection between them, and the haughty well-to-do tradesmen of Murat? Again, what goddess did Saint Antonin find here at his coming? Did she take a delight in slaughter, and have a sanctuary in the shambles? If so was she related to the virgin Diana, who had like tastes, and whom we have already found near by at Dienne, and possibly at Font Sainte?

But Sister Marie Ange is troubled with none of these heretical speculations. To her, religion began with the coming of Christianity, and all which came before, all the

yearning after an ideal, the sacrifice, the striving after perfection, as the early men of these parts understood perfection, is classed under the name of, and dismissed as, paganism.

Opposite the Rock Bonnevie, on the farther side of the River Alagnon, rises another steep hill, on which is the ancient church of Bredons. There has been a bridge over the river here, ever since bridges were known in Cantal, and the old arch, whose remains are still to be seen, was formerly presided over by a very curious statue of the Virgin, now to be found in the church on the hill above. The statue has always been held in the greatest veneration by the people of the district, and when it still occupied its old position as guardian of the bridge, no one ever thought of passing without kneeling and offering up a prayer. The most astounding stories are told of cures effected by this Virgin, especially on those afflicted with ulcers, and other skin diseases. The church in which the image must now be sought is itself a wonderful old building, consecrated by Durand, Bishop of Clermont in 1095, and scarcely touched since. Indeed Bredons is a most interesting place, well worth the steep climb it takes to reach it.

There is little doubt that it was the original worshipping place of the district, just as the Rock Bonnevie was the original fortress.

Immediately outside the village, there is an ancient stone covered with mysterious sculptures and hieroglyphics, which archæologists tell us was once the centre of some early cult. In those days Bredons was a difficult place to reach, for as there was no bridge, the river had to be forded, and the river god as usual took his toll of life. Therefore, when at last a bridge was built, a little grotto



THE ROAD TO BREDONS

was hollowed at foot of the rock on the Bredons side, that pilgrims might return thanks for their safe passage, before beginning their ascent to the sanctuary on the summit.

The first Christian church of the neighbourhood was raised on this summit, on the site of the ancient sanctuary; and even to-day, Bredons is the mother church, retaining, among other privileges, the right of ringing of her bells, before those of her daughter of Murat. At foot of the rock, they left the old grotto, with its statue of the kindly goddess, who presided over the safety of travellers, and there long afterwards, old Père Blanche found pilgrims going to worship at the shrine of Notre Dame du Pont.

Standing on the hill of Bredons, we have a fine view of the valley, from which rise the volcanoes, the dead volcanoes, so emblematical of the tumult of massacre and war, through which Murat has passed. There stand the jagged, ruined summits, their life extinct, as that of the Seigneurs who once dwelt on Rock Bonnevie.

These "Viscounts," as they are styled, seem to have been a turbulent race. The last who made any figure in the history of France, was Jacques d'Armagnac, Duc de Nemours. Every one will remember what a thorn he was in the side of his sovereign, Louis the Eleventh. It was here that he hatched most of his plots against the king. Taken at last, he was carried to Paris, and put into one of those cages which were then in vogue, where he remained till the day he was beheaded. His fate was hard, but he had given a world of trouble, and the king behaved better than might have been expected, for after the death of Armagnac, he restored Murat to his children. Under the nave of Bredons church, five of the Counts of Armagnac

lie buried, but the stones are so worn that it is difficult to say which they are.

From Murat almost to Brioude we had the company of the Alagnon, one of those streams which take their rise on the flanks of the Plomb de Cantal, that great central mass which forms the pivot of the district. For to understand the geography of this department, one must realize its origin. Imagine a vast volcano, the base twenty-five leagues in diameter. Long long ago it ceased its activity, and the huge cone has sunk little by little, so that the edge of the shallow crater now forms a circle of peaks, which are the great mountains or Puys of the district, Puy Mary, Puy Gros, Puy Brunet, and so on, while in the centre of the ring rises Puy Griou. Down the sides of the mighty mass, the streams which rise above have worn sixteen great rectilinear valleys, disposed like the spokes of a wheel. For a time they run regularly enough, but presently, meeting the great circle of primary rock, which surrounds the volcano as a coral reef surrounds its island, they take to winding about as though the streams which formed them were seeking an exit. Finally, they break through in three great channels, the gorges of the Alagnon, the Lot, and the Dordogne. Such, according to a French writer, is Cantal.

And it was down the first of these magnificent cañons that we made our way toward Brioude.

The road proved fairly level, running along the bottom of the valley, but the cliffs on either hand are stupendous, and nothing can be more beautiful than these towering walls of violet rock hung with rich green foliage. So winding is the river that it is impossible to see one's way or more than a few feet ahead, and as the road twists and turns according to the windings of the gorge, so the view

is continually changing its character. Once, hiding behind a projection of the cliff, we came upon the little village of Saint-Mary-le-Cros, where the great saint of Cantal, Mary or Marius, had his hermitage. This Valley of the Alagnon was his special field, and here he laboured unceasingly. It would be a wild place to settle in even to-day, but it is incredible to think of an educated Italian taking up his abode there in the middle of the first century. Yet that is what Mary did. He lived in a grotto, now hidden by the church, and passed the remainder of his life ministering to the wants of the savage people who dwelt in the forests around. Little by little they grew to understand both him and his religion, till the valley of the Alagnon from Neussargues to Brioude became Christian. And though he died in the year 84, his memory is still green in the hearts of the people. His body rests to-day at Mauriac, but here in the little village where he lived, they still show the rock chair where he sat and preached, La Chaire de Saint Mary; and though the procession formerly made to it has been given up, sick people continue to go and sit in it to be cured of various diseases. Quite close by is Saint Mary's Fountain, still in great repute; and above all there is the gorge, up and down which the old man used to wander, healing the sick, and preaching the gospel.

The town of Brioude is known to all students of Froissart, as the head-quarters of the Brigand Louis Raimbaut, and his brother-in-arms the Limousin. No doubt my readers have often pictured the old Chronicler seated beside the fire at the Hostel of the Moon, at Orthez, listening while the Gascon squire Le Bastot de Mauléon regaled him with the story of these two rascals. They lived in the days when this part of France had fallen

into the hands of the "Companies," the days of Edward the Black Prince, and the Battle of Poitiers. Most of the great French nobles were hostages in England, and the country was at the mercy of lawless bandits. Brioude had already suffered much from a certain Sir Seguin de Batefol, who, after pillaging the neighbourhood, had marched back with great plunder to Gascony, from whence he had come, and, to use the words of the old Chronicle, "Of this Sir Seguin I know nothing more, except that by accident I heard that he died in an extraordinary manner. God pardon him for all his misdeeds!"

But of his successors, Louis Raimbaut, and his friend the Limousin, Froissart has much to tell. We talked of it, the landlord and I, as we sat by the fire that evening, for Brioude is still, as in the days of Sidonius Apollinaris, "a town favourable to strangers." The inn was so old and quaint, that I felt almost as though I were sitting in the parlour at Orthez, hearing the story for the first time. As I spoke of Louis Raimbaut's beautiful mistress, and told of her being given into the charge of the Limousin while Louis went on his marauding expeditions, my host nodded sagely as though guessing what the result of that rash act would be. And when I went on to tell of the Limousin's punishment, how he was marched naked, and flogged with rods, through the streets, while before him trumpets were sounded, and his treachery proclaimed, till finally with nothing but an old coat to cover him he was thrust out of the gate into the open country, the landlord gazed at me in open-eyed wonder and delight.

"I have lived here all my life," said he at last, "and I never heard of them before! And what happened afterwards, for I'll warrant that was not the end of the matter?"

(Again I thought of Froissart and smiled. "Wishing him to continue his conversation," says the Chronicle, "I asked what was become of the gallant squire Louis Raimbaut . . . ")

"No," said I, "you are right. It was not the end. The Limousin's opportunity came at last. He left the Companions, and joined the French, and knowing all Louis' plans, was soon able to catch him returning from one of his journeys."

The landlord laughed with excitement.

"I wish I had been there!" he cried. "I wonder what he said when he came face to face with Louis Raimbaut!"

"I can tell you," said I, and quoted: "Louis, Louis, you should have been better accompanied. Do you remember the insult and shame you made me undergo at Brioude? I did not think that for a woman you would have made me suffer what you did! Had it happened to me I should not have been so angry!"

"And he was right!" cried my host, slapping his knee. "She was not worth it! Do you think I would quarrel with my best friend for such a woman as that?"

"As Madame cares for such stories," suggested the landlady, who had been listening silently, as she stitched away by the light of a paraffin lamp, "you might take her, Mathurin, to Château de La Mothe, to see Tante Angélique."

"To be sure!" exclaimed her husband, "the very thing! The good aunt will be delighted to have a listener, and Madame will, I am sure, be pleased with the castle, which indeed is very ancient, built, they say, in the time of Philip Augustus."

The project sounded delightful, so next morning about ten o'clock we found ourselves running down the straight

level road at the end of which stands the hill, still crowned by the picturesque castle of La Mothe.

The Viscounts who ruled here before the time of the Revolution, were a branch of the family of Canillac, and bore the name of La Mothe-Canillac. Of all the wicked nobles of Auvergne, and there was at least one on every hill-top, these lords of Canillac were the worst. Speaking of the head of the house in 1665, Fléchier says that the peculiar character of the Marquis was that he felt absolutely no remorse, simply laughing at all his wickedness!

And what was true of him was true of all the other members of his family, even of Monsieur de La Mothe de Canillac, who, with his wife and only daughter, inhabited this castle, and was the best of the bad race. So when Louis XIV. sent out his great assize to inquire into the crimes of the nobles of Auvergne, one of the first to be arrested was the lord of La Mothe.

The village bears about the same relation to the Château, that a pigsty does to a palace, and the sight of these still wretched hovels, cringing at the gate of the stately building, made me shudder. Yet no doubt they are very different to-day to what they once were. As we entered the great gloomy courtyard, the present slipped away with its ideas of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, and we were back in the days when the lords were still virtually the gods of the people over whom they ruled, regarding their vassals just as to-day a farmer regards his cattle: men, women, and children merely so much live stock, to be used according to the pleasure of Monseigneur!

“Bonjour, Mathurin!”

And there, at the great door, where once Monsieur le Marquis had stood, whipping his boot impatiently as he waited for his horse, I saw a little smiling old woman.



CHÂTEAU DE LA MOTTE

Tante Angélique must surely have been warned of our coming, so immaculate was her cap, so glossy her black gown and apron. The apartment too, which she rented in the castle, was as spick-and-span as she was. After Maturin and she had embraced, and we had been duly presented, she led us up the great stone staircase to her salon on the first floor. On the way we passed her kitchen, a narrow oak-panelled chamber, glittering with copper and brass, a place of lights and shadows, a study in warm orange and Vandyke brown. It was but a glimpse I caught, then found myself in a charming room where not a chair seemed to have been moved since the days of *Les Grand Jours*. "How I should love to come and write here!" I exclaimed, looking enviously round the octagonal vaulted chamber, with its white-panelled walls. In the curtained alcove stood a bed, which might have belonged to *Mademoiselle de la Mothe-Canillac*, the last of the name; while from the deeply recessed window one looked down over the broad valley of the Allier, to Brioude lying in the sunshine.

"Mais, Madame, nothing would be easier! *N'est-ce pas, tante Angélique?* You would like Madame to come and write the history of the Château?" cried the landlord.

"And I could have this very room?" I asked, picturing the lords and ladies whose memories would visit me, and whose stories I would tell.

"Mais oui, certainement!" replied la tante smilingly, "it is said to have always been the favourite chamber of *Mademoiselle*." I looked round the room with even keener interest. Already I felt the pride of ownership.

"And what is that trap-door?" I asked carelessly. "Ah, it is one of the *oubliettes*," said Tante Angélique. "Most

of the rooms are provided with one. But they are no longer serviceable."

Yet, in spite of this assurance, my desire to stay at La Mothe was vanishing. Fancy sleeping in a room with an oubliette! An excellent notion no doubt, when the Canillacs still dwelt in the castle. These old walls had secrets to keep, and awkward visitors would arrive and ask questions. Well, give them a good supper, put them to sleep in one of the tower rooms, a bolt left unfastened, and—one heard no more of them!

The great castle is to-day let out in apartments. The Curé occupies the room where Monsieur de La Mothe was sleeping, when the Provost of Auvergne and his archers roused him, and marched him off to Clermont, to be tried and executed. Here, in what is now the priest's study, a Pope once slept; the bed he used still stands in the alcove. But it is when one goes down to the cellars and dungeons that one realizes the character of these lords of Auvergne. Perhaps in no part of France did the lower classes suffer as they did here. Cut off by the mountains, the nobles were answerable to no one for their conduct, and for whatever they did, their victims had no redress. From time to time inquiries had been held, but little or nothing was done. At last the local judges, waking to a sense of the situation, appealed to Louis XIV., and commissioners armed with extraordinary powers were sent to inquire into the state of affairs. One of the chiefs of the assize was Monsieur de Caumartin, Maître de Requêtes, who took with him his young son, and, fortunately for us, the boy's tutor, a young priest of thirty-five, Fléchier, since known as the author of those entrancing *Mémoires*, which give the only picture we have of Auvergne in the seventeenth century. The days he describes could not have been

pleasant for some of the nobles. During the four months that the assize lasted, more than twelve thousand cases were heard. Yet much remained undone, and it needed the Great Revolution to rid the land entirely of such oppression and wrong, as we find vestiges of in the dungeons of La Mothe.

Les Souterrains, as Tante Angélique called them, with a comprehensive wave of the hand, are suggestive of truly mediæval horrors. Down here was the original entrance to the castle, the steep narrow passage within the portcullis, hemmed in with dungeons and stone chambers, from which armed men could spring out on an unwelcome guest. Overhead are still openings, through which it was the startling custom of the time, to pour boiling oil or water by way of welcome. And in one place, through a hole in the ground, we were shown the bottom of that very oubliette whose entrance I had seen above. Into the well "Ma Tante" threw a lighted paper, and we saw that the hole grew into a broad pit as it descended. The flames lighted up the rough walls, till fifty feet below appeared a circular dungeon, and on the floor what Mathurin declared were human bones. I shuddered!

"Mais, Madame, what would you," exclaimed Tante Angélique. "To each century its mode! It was the fashion in those days!"

We took la bonne tante back with us in the automobile, much to her delight, and by way of recompense she went with us to the Basilica of Saint Julien, and told us the story of the young soldier-martyr.

The church is one of the finest examples of what is called Roman-Byzantine-Auvergnat architecture, the most interesting of all styles to the photographer and the

archæologist. There, as Dominique Branche says, you will find "flowers which no land has ever been able to produce, and creatures still more extraordinary, blossoming and amusing themselves over the walls. All the lavas our soil produces have lent the monks their greys and blacks, their reds and whites. This splendid covering of many-coloured mosaic, clothes the outer walls of the apse, and hangs like a veil of Syrian embroidery above the entrances." Through the great south porch with its curious squat pillars, we followed our guide, and when she had paid her devotions at the shrine, listened to the story she had to tell.

It was on the 28th of August 403 that a troop of Roman soldiers beheaded Saint Julien in the little village of Vinicelle, to-day called Saint-Férreol, in memory of Julien's friend and master. It happened that the place was quite deserted, the peasants being all away down by the Allier, where a fête was being held in honour of Mars and Mercury, the tutelary gods of the place. No one was by save two shepherds, Ilpize and Arcons, who, being old and unable to leave their sheep, had remained behind. They were ignorant peasants, probably pagans, but good and honest, and to them God made known the murder of the saint, bidding them go and bury him in Brioude. It was two good kilometres from the place where they found the still bleeding body, and much they wondered how they were to carry the burden, so old they were and so feeble. But suddenly as they tried to raise the saint, their limbs became strong, the blood flowed freshly through their veins, and the two old men found themselves once more in their early manhood. The first thing they did was to bear their sacred burden to Brioude and bury it, and at sight of these two ancient creatures so youthful and strong,

pilgrims began to flock to the grave, and to the fountain where the body had been washed, hoping no doubt to find a like restoration to youth. So Ilpize and Arcons made up their minds to settle down as guardians of the sacred body, and took up their abode close by. For long years they remained serving God, ministering to the poor pilgrims, and beautifying as well as they could the tomb. At last one day there arrived a great Spanish lady, bringing her husband, who was afflicted with some grievous disease. Happily the prayers of the living saints, and the sanctity of the dead, to say nothing of the faith of the patient, were effectual, and out of gratitude the Spaniards raised the first chapel to Saint Julien. It stood, not where the present basilica stands, but about two leagues distant, at Old Brioude. It was there, on the banks of the Allier, that the shepherds had buried the saint, and probably it was on the site of the little temple to Mars and Mercury, that the Spaniards raised the first chapel to the soldier-martyr. Vieille Brioude has long been eclipsed by her daughter town, in point of size and importance, for after the destruction of the original church by the Saracens, the remains of Saint Julien, together with those of his faithful shepherds, were removed further from the river, and the pilgrims forsook the old tomb for the new, so that monasteries sprang up, and trade gathered round the shrine, which soon became the nucleus of a large and prosperous town. But it is to old Brioude we must go to discover the origin of its name. Brioude or Brivas is a Celtic word meaning a bridge, and at Vieille Brioude we shall find the remains of a very interesting structure.

Flumen Aler, as the Romans called the river, here enters an inaccessible gorge which extends for many miles. If,

therefore, the people of Brioude wished to cross from one side to the other, they must do so here. And, in effect, just at this particular spot, the rocks stand face to face like the piles of a gigantic bridge. So from very ancient times Vieille Brioude was the crossing place of a river, and as such became an important centre of trade and commerce. It was there that the people from either side held markets, and where there is a market there must be a worshipping place, in which to return thanks for business transacted. Besides there was always the old river deity, of whom I have already spoken, to be reckoned with. And so shortly, there arose beside the bridge, a temple dedicated to Mars, the god of war, cattle, and commerce; and Mercury, who, according to some people, was merely a later impersonation of the same divinity. At the fête held annually in honour of the god, a horse was sacrificed, whose head, washed and decorated with a string of loaves, was sent to the chief, and it is curious to note that the emblem of the soldier-saint, who replaced the heathen god, was a sword, and a head surrounded by rays of glory (Julien's head of course, which, washed and decorated, was sent to his friend and master at Vienne); curious too that the tribute offered every year to the King of France by the Count-Abbots of Brioude was a horse!

Speaking of the Abbot of Brioude reminds us of that remarkable person, who in early days ruled over his fifty-four canons like a little king. Later the canons themselves aspired to the title of count, and no less than twenty-two of them figure as such in the annals of Brioude. They moreover held the rank of bishops, officiating in violet robes and wearing the cross and mitre, enjoying feudal rights, and leaving the duty of praising God to the almoner and eighteen inferior canons. Of course they were all nobles



THE BRIDGE AT OLD BRIOUDE

of the highest rank, the King of France himself being an honorary member of the fraternity, and having a stall assigned him in the basilica.

But let us return to Vieille Brioude and visit the famous bridge, or rather its grandson.

The first viaduct was no doubt a very primitive affair, a thing of wooden beams. It had its day and ceased to be, and no vestige of it remains.

On the cliff above the river was a castle, and in the castle dwelt a lady called Marie Louise de Dombes, who had a great devotion to the soldier-saint who had replaced the heathen gods of her ancestors. The old bridge having fallen into disuse, she determined to build another, in order that the peasants on the farther side of the river, might attend divine service in the church which had arisen at Vieille Brioude.

The bridge is described as a curious structure, too narrow and too steep for carts to pass. The good lady was apparently not very free with her money, for when the building was finished, and it only remained to insert the keystone and remove the centering, the workmen found that they could not get their pay. So they struck, and left in a body. Now it was, as I have said, a very peculiar bridge, and no one dared to finish it, feeling sure that it would fall. So there it remained, a regular White Elephant to the Lady of Dombes, who grew so tired of the eyesore, that she kept offering higher and higher rewards for anyone who would complete the work. At last one day came a poor man to the castle.

"I am a builder," said he, "and I am poor. My life is worth little to me as it is. Give me the money, and I will strike the centering."

It was no use bargaining, the lady had to pay. You can

guess the result. The stranger was the master-builder himself! Going to the middle of his bridge, he slipped in the keystone which he had ready, and a few moments later, the wooden framework was washing down the Allier!

And now there is a third bridge at Old Brioude, a broad, handsome, stone viaduct, which even the car had no difficulty in crossing. But the pilgrims pass on through the village to the modern town beyond, where we shall still find the sculptured stall, where the King of France used to sit when he paid a visit to the shrine: and there we shall be shown the tombs of the Christian saint of war, and his devoted missionaries, Ilpize and Arcons. Tante Angélique and the good Mathurin had exhibited these things and many more, when the former asked me to follow her to the side-chapel of Saint Martin.

"It is here," she said, "that they buried the holy goose-girl of Allvier. As the village is near to La Mothe, I never fail to visit her tomb when I am in Brioude."

And as we stood in the dim twilight of the chapel she told me the story of the saint, using almost the same words as the monk of Pébrac did three hundred years ago.

"Every day when she was feeding her geese beside the river, she would leave them in the care of God, and, rowing across the water, would make her way to Brioude to visit the shrine of the holy Julien, for whom she had so singular a devotion."

It appears, however, that once after a great rain she found it impossible to pass to the other side.

"But," says Jacques Branche, "God sent His angel, who dried up the waters of the Allier, so that Saint Bonnite

went over dry shod. Many saw her, so that the news of the miracle spread. And she became a saint, taking up her abode beside the tomb, where she remained till the day of her death, when her bones were buried here, close to those of her master, Saint Julien."

CHAPTER IX

Le Puy—A Night Visit—The Druidical Stone—The Legend of Saint Georges—The Cathedral—The Black Virgin of Saint Louis—Royal Pilgrims—Adhémar du Monteil and the *Salve Regina*—The Revolution at Le Puy—Burning of the Black Virgin—The Chapel of Saint Michel—Church of Saint Laurent—Tomb of Bertrand du Guesclin—Polignac—The Castle and its Story—The Oracle of Apollo

WHEN, forty-five years after the birth of Christ, Saint Peter sent out his bishops to Christianize Gaul, Saint Georges and Saint Front set forth together, for were they not friends! They had scarcely been travelling three days when Georges, seized with sudden illness, died, and Front, inconsolable, returned to the apostle, who, giving him his pastoral staff, told him to lay it on the tomb of his companion, when, like a second Lazarus, he would arise. And it was so!

The journey so inauspiciously begun, turned out happily: the saints continued their interrupted travels, Georges settling at a town called Ruessium, now known as Saint-Paulien, and Front going on to Perigueux. The story of the miracle must be true, for half the staff is still to be seen at Le Puy in the house of Les Dames de l'Instruction! As for Georges, he began a battle with the powers of darkness which lasted the rest of his life, and the success of which is marked by that wonder of wonders, the church of Notre Dame du Puy.

The district where he had settled was a great centre of Sun-worship. Everywhere there were temples to Apollo;

one of the most noted being that of Ruessium. The pagan priests naturally resented the coming of this young man, who, with the enthusiasm and fearlessness which marked the early missionaries of Christianity, began teaching in the public streets, rousing the people to a sense of the falseness and inadequacy of their religion. At last one day, as he was preaching in front of the very temple itself, he was seized, stoned, dragged in the mud, almost murdered. Escaping, he rushed into the temple for sanctuary, when the demons with which the place was filled, crying out in terror, quitted the statues in which they were enshrined, and under the form of horrible black shadows spitting out fire and brimstone, rushed with frightful howlings out of the building. Such, according to tradition, was the exorcism of the demons of Ruessium. So Georges was left in possession of the temple, which he purified and dedicated to God, under the invocation of Notre Dame du Haut Solier, which I take to mean Our Lady of the Sun at Midday. It was the introduction of Christianity into Velay, as testifies an ancient Sanctoral of the church of Our Lady of Puy, which contains these words, "On your knees, oh people of Velay, honour Mary the Mother of God, whom Georges, your first pastor, taught you to revere."

Now at some little distance from Ruessium lay a strange unfrequented valley, haunted by memories of even blacker demons than those which Georges had exorcized from Ruessium. Here and there, emerging above the thick forests with which the valley was covered, were steep cones of rock, for all the world like vast Cyclopean altars. The same thought seems to have struck the priests who ministered to the wild inhabitants of the valley, for from earliest time there was a sanctuary on each of these heights,

a sanctuary which possibly marked the resting-place of some prehistoric chief.

Of all these weird cones of rock, Mount Anis is the most important. On its summit was placed the mighty dolmen upon which from time immemorial sacrifices had been offered to the virgin who should bear a son. To-day the valley is filled with the cheerful habitations of men, covered with vineyards and cornfields. But two thousand years ago it was full of the silence of the forests, whose mysteries and horrors had to be braved e'er one could reach the temple on the height, where stood the Sacred Stone.

It was on this stone a widow woman was lying, afflicted with rheumatic fever, when the Blessed Virgin appeared, telling her of Her wish to have a Christian sanctuary raised on Mount Anis. If you have been to Le Puy you will have heard the story. How waking and finding herself cured of her fever, she hastened to Ruessium and found Georges, the bishop, to whom she reported the miracle. Then back they travelled to the sacred mountain to find, oh ! wondrous sight ! the whole summit of the rock covered with snow, though it was a hot day in July. And as they gazed in wonder, behold a stag sprang out from the thicket, and leaping round the edge of the rock on the centre of which lay the stone, vanished, leaving his footmarks in the snow. It was a sign, and Georges, too poor to build a church, dared not disregard it. So he planted a hawthorn hedge round the holy place, following the footmarks left by the mysterious stag. Next morning the snow had gone, but round the summit of the mountain was a crown of snowy hawthorn. It was enough ! From henceforth the place was sacred to the Virgin, and when Saint Martial came to consecrate it, he brought with him

as a gift a shoe of "La Bonne Dame" herself, which is still to be seen in the treasury.

Time went on. Saint Georges went to his rest, and a long line of Bishops of Velay followed him. The hawthorn hedge had grown into a grove, sheltering the pious pilgrims who still went to pass the night upon the Sacred Stone.

In the year 350 once more the Virgin appeared, this time to a paralytic lady. Waking, and finding herself cured, she naturally sought her bishop, a rich man of the name of Vosy, and it was by his energy that the first Christian church was raised on Mount Anis. Later the bishopric itself was removed from Ruessium to Le Puy, as the district began to be called, and after that the history of Velay centred round the new Cathedral of Saint Vosy.

I know of no spot where one can better study the evolution of religion than on this ancient high-place. True, the great stone has been removed from its original position in front of the high altar, and now lies just inside the porch at the top of the grand staircase. But even there people still come to lie upon it, and it has a special altar of its own, decorated with flowers brought by humble worshippers, while below, on the step leading to it, are carved the words: *PLEBS HAC RUPE SITA FIT SANA SOPORE POTILA. SI QUÆRAS QUARE VIRTUS ABSCRIBITUR ARÆ.*

And when you have knelt and made your prayer on the stone, you ascend to the Lady of the Stone, the Mother of Health and Healing. A beautiful symbol, is it not, the Druid altar a Marche Pied leading to the Virgin herself? The old religion conducting to the new.

We arrived late at Le Puy, and put up at the only

decent inn, the Grand Hotel. It is a quaint rambling old place, the rooms all opening on to the same side of a long courtyard, where you may sit, surrounded by dogs, and watch your dinner being cooked in the copper-hung kitchen, while you dream of the days when the stables were full of post horses. They are silent now, save for the occasional hoot of an automobile. But on the whole it is a pleasant quiet place, well in keeping with the ghostly old town.

After dinner we wandered out, and soon lost ourselves among the dark maze of narrow streets which lead upward toward the church. As we drew nearer, the road grew steeper and steeper, till at last it broke into a huge stairway up which we climbed toward the cathedral looming above in the darkness. Formerly these steps continued ascending under the porch, and through the nave, right to the foot of the altar, where they ended, and the pilgrim found himself standing on the mysterious stone, gazing up at the no less mysterious statue of the Black Virgin. But the priests found it difficult to conduct divine service by reason of the swarms of sick folk who came to lie on the stone. They had it removed, therefore, to the centre of the church, and later, to the position it now occupies just within the shelter of the porch. As for the staircase, it still ends at the stone, for the nave has been floored, and is like the naves of other churches, which is to be infinitely deplored from an archæological point of view.

During the latter part of our climb, we had gradually become more and more conscious of a low growling, or roaring, coming from the church. As we entered the black shadow of the porch it sounded so loud and sinister, that I instinctively drew back ; it made me think of those demons exorcised by Saint Georges at Ruessium.

"It is no use going farther now!" said I hurriedly; "we shall see nothing if we do. We will come again by daylight." So we turned, and made our way round the winding walls, whose irregular outline still reminds one of the track left by the leaping stag, to the little terrace in front of the Bishop's Palace, where is the wonderful south porch. And there we stood gazing down at the twinkling lights of Puy, picturing Vosy and Scutaire setting forth for Rome, to obtain from the Pope permission to consecrate the first church.

Down by the river, lights are gleaming in the windows of Le Petit Séminaire de la Chartreuse. It was just there that the bishop and his chaplain met the two mysterious old men, bearing in their hands the precious relics destined for the altar; and heard how the consecration was to be performed the next day by angels. It was so dark and silent up there on the Mount, and the memories thronged so thickly round me, that I could almost fancy I heard the bells "ringing of themselves" as they did that day; and as I turned to look up at the church, I half expected to find the doors opened by invisible hands, and the windows ablaze with candles and flaming torches.

But the days of such marvels are over. They ended when, on January the nineteenth 1794, the miraculous statue was torn from the niche above the altar, and burned by the Republicans in the Place du Martouret.

When next morning we once more climbed Mount Anis, we found the stairway less formidable. White-capped women were sitting at their doors, busy with their lace pillows, and the clicking of innumerable bobbins filled the air with cheerful life. Within the porch, an old woman had established herself and her stall for the day, and as I looked over her stock-in-trade, we fell into conversation,

and I asked her what the noise which I had heard the night before could possibly have been.

"Eh! Eh!" she exclaimed in a vexed tone, "I'll wager it is that old Eusèbe again! I must tell Monsieur the Mayor of it! It is unbearable."

She went on to explain that an old beggar man persisted in sleeping every night on La Pierre Sacrée. What for? But for his rheumatism naturally. Still it must be stopped. He was too dirty. Other pilgrims complained that they caught fleas and sometimes even worse. Besides, he was rich, he had 600 francs a year! Why not hire a mattress?

"He should go to the hospital!" said I.

"But, Madame, assuredly he has been, oh! many times! Yet he always returns to the stone. And he has reason. Nothing else relieves the pain. Only he should have consideration for others and wash himself once a week."

I found this old woman so interesting, that I used to come and talk to her whenever I could make time, and it was from her that I learned a good many legends of the church of Le Puy. She told me that it was her great-uncle, Monsieur Portallier, who saved the priests at the time of the Revolution.

"I wish he had saved the old statue!" said I.

"Ah, Madame," she exclaimed, "what a misfortune! La Belle Dame Noire brought by Saint Louis himself from Egypt! But there is consolation in the thought that the devotion offered to Notre Dame du Puy has attached itself to the new statue no less than to the old. It is indeed so exact a copy that it would be difficult to tell the difference."

It seems that when Louis the Ninth was on his way to

Palestine to join the Crusade, he was taken prisoner by the Sultan of Egypt. While waiting for his ransom to be sent from France, the young king took the opportunity of seeing some of the wonders of the country, and amongst other things was shown, in one of the temples, a mysterious black statue representing a mother and child. It was regarded with the greatest veneration by the Egyptians, and was undoubtedly an image of Isis and her son Horus. The Christian king, however, being no Egyptologist, had never heard of Isis. To him any statue of a mother and child stood for the Blessed Virgin, and as such he adored it. At last, the ransom paid, he found himself free to leave Egypt, and was invited by the Sultan, after the Oriental fashion, to choose a gift to take with him. When, however, he mentioned the sacred image, the Sultan hesitated. But his word had been given, and Louis sailed off with the little black statue of Isis packed away in his ship. I don't know whether it was during the voyage that the Christian legend of her origin was evolved, but when later he brought her to Le Puy and set her up over the altar, he told the story of her having been carved by the Prophet Jeremiah, when, after the conquest of Jerusalem, he fled down into Egypt. Kings and queens came to visit her in her new abode. Copies were made and taken to distant churches, where they were revered under the name of Notre Dame du Puy—we find various examples, one most remarkable, in the museum of Clermont.

As we entered the church, we found that a funeral was in progress, a humble affair. The sight of the plain deal coffin, surrounded by tall candles, in front of La Vierge Noire, set me thinking. How beautiful is this Evolution

of Religion, the new faith founded on and rooted in the old! Here were represented no less than four creeds. First the Black Virgin herself, succeeding the earlier Mother, both looking down upon the old sacrificial stone of Druid and pre-Druid times, and in the midst the Dead, object of the earliest of all cults.

The church of Le Puy is indeed a most wonderful building, full of endless surprises, and interesting mementos of the past. Beneath the tower are sculptured stones, remnants of the Roman temple which once stood on Mount Anis, with bas-reliefs which, if we only knew, might throw some light on the legend of the leaping stag. Here too is the tomb of some noble pilgrim kneeling in adoration before the statue of the Virgin.

Until some few years ago there was an even more interesting relic, an old calvary, the carved pedestal of which was still more ancient. Every year, at the feast of the Dedication of Our Lady, the clergy of the church used to go to this place to celebrate the victory of Christianity. On the stone they set a little choir boy, who gave three blasts on a hunting-horn made of terra-cotta, just as the priest of the Druids is said to have stood on the same stone, blowing his horn to call the worshippers to the sacrifice.

The Sacristan was a friendly soul, letting us go where we would, and photograph freely. He took us up to the roof, insisting on my climbing ladders the very sight of which made me sick and giddy, and pointed out the demons whose misshapen stone bodies help to buttress the central tower. He showed us the room where the great Charlemagne played chess with the Saracen Prince of Lourdes, Mirat, and told me how he had refused to deliver up his castle to the Emperor himself, but came hither and



THE CLOISTER OF NOTRE DAME DU PUY

gave it to the Black Virgin, who was then ruling at Le Puy. On the wall is a very old fresco, showing the two seated at their game.

We wandered with the Sacristan through the cloisters, and heard about the early bishops, whose statues adorn the walls, and in the museum saw the portraits and other votive offerings given by noble pilgrims. One struck me as very curious, it was the picture of a nun supping in quite a friendly way with Saint Joseph, and an exact representation of the Black Virgin herself. Indeed, when at last our guide invited us to rest in the old chamber he inhabited, my head was in a whirl. I looked round at the heavy beams and vast chimney. "Do you ever hear Charlemagne and the Saracen prince quarrelling in the room above?" I asked.

The Sacristan smiled indulgently and shook his head.

"No, Madame!" said he. "Fortunately the phantoms of the past agree very well at Le Puy."

"That is good," I remarked, "for there must be many who certainly did not agree in life!" and I sat thinking of some of the scenes of which I had been hearing. There was the story of the little singing boy murdered by the Jews, and recalled to life through the devotion he bore to Notre Dame du Puy. We know the legend from the ancient picture and the verse:

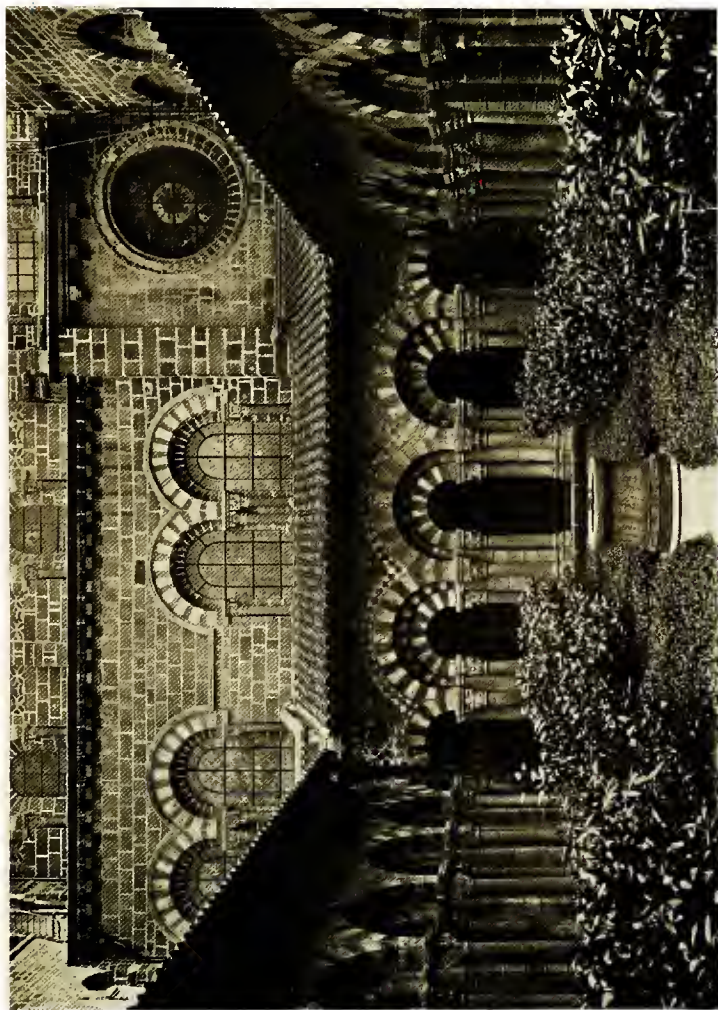
"Un enfant de Chœur a chanté,
Que Gabriel bonne nouvelle
En Nazareth nous a porté :
Un Juif le tuë, et la Pucelle
Marie la resuscité."

And then I thought of the little Agnès, who out of love for the Virgin, put an iron chain round her poor little waist, which she wore for seven years; till as she grew the links

ate their way into her flesh, and when she took it off at last and presented it on the altar, it made a mark of blood where she laid it.

Then I fell to picturing the royal pilgrims who had come to Le Puy: Charlemagne himself, not as he is represented in legend, with a great beard, and robes heavy with precious stones, the orb in one hand and the sceptre in the other, a most impossible arrangement, but a tall, bull-necked man, with the round head, large bright eyes, and long hair and moustache of the Frank, dressed in a linen shirt and short furred tunic. He introduces us to his five unmarried daughters, and to his unfortunate son Louis le Débonnaire, who came here with his wicked and fascinating wife Judith and their little son Charles la Frise. And Charles comes here again when he has lost his golden hair and is called Charles the Bald. And we meet the mad king, Charles the Sixth, who came hoping to be healed of his delirium. Here he sat in the cathedral, and to him the people thronged to be touched for the king's evil. And Charles the Seventh came five times, bringing standards he had taken from the English; and the mother of Jeanne d'Arc arrived one day, praying for the success of her daughter. Louis the Eleventh too, we may be sure, made the pilgrimage more than once, and his son Charles the Eighth, and the magnificent Francis, and even John Stuart, Regent of Scotland. But the real hero of Le Puy is Adhémar du Monteil.

Do you remember a Bishop of Le Puy, who, after hearing the rousing words of Peter the Hermit at Clermont, fell at the feet of Pope Urban II., and joined the First Crusade? That was Adhémar du Monteil. And he did not stop with the dedication of himself. I should like to have been present at the sermon he preached in the Cathedral



THE CLOISTER GARDEN OF NOTRE DAME DU PUY

of Le Puy on the Sunday after his return from Clermont. He must have been a great personality. They say that the number of converts he made was so great, that all the red material to be found in the town was used up for making crosses. Of the warriors who started on that Crusade, between four and five thousand came from the diocese of Adhémar du Monteil. And when the day of departure arrived, what a sight it must have been. There, in the great church which we know so well, were gathered the soldiers of the Red Cross, their beloved Bishop at their head. Standing on the ancient stone of the Druids, he spoke his last few stirring words of encouragement and farewell to those who were to be left behind. Then turning to the east, where above the altar sat that most mysterious image, that first Virgin of Le Puy of which we know nothing, save that it was probably the statue of the original Druidic goddess of Mount Anis, the Bishop raised his hand, and for the first time was heard the hymn :

“*Salve, Regina, Mater misericordiæ, vita, dulcedo et spes nostra
salve !*”

Listen ! it is the new anthem composed for the occasion by Bishop Adhémar. I wonder how many of the millions of Catholics who sing this hymn have ever heard of its author ? And now, down the great stairway leading from the altar, and so out under the porch, pours the living stream of warriors. And the bells are ringing, and every one is shouting, save a few women who weep :

“*O clemens, O Pia,
O dulcis Virgo Maria !*”

And it is the whole city that answers :

“*Ora pro nobis, sancta Dei genitrix.
Ut digni efficiamur promissionibus Christi !*”

As I picture the soldiers, the banners, the ringing, the enthusiasm, the song, and even the weeping, another scene rises before me of a great Northern cathedral, crowded with singing troops, clad in khaki :

“Fight the good fight with all thy might,
Christ is thy Strength, and Christ thy Right.”

It is the City Imperial Volunteers. To-morrow they start for South Africa. The clear, manly voices of the young soldiers swell and vibrate through the nave and transepts, mingling with the echoes of the vaults below, and soaring up into the misty dome.

But I am forgetting. It is of Le Puy we are speaking, not of Saint Paul's Cathedral ; and there are still so many stories to tell of Le Puy. Come with me to the Bishop's Palace.

There, in 1572, we might have seen a most wonderful sight. Letters have been sent to every town in France by His Catholic Majesty, King Charles IX. They have arrived at Le Puy, a great Huguenot centre, and the good Bishop Senectère has passed a troubled day. At last, however, his mind is made up, and he sends round to all the Protestants in his diocese, summoning them to the palace on Sunday, the twenty-fourth of August, the Day of Saint Bartholomew. There they assembled, probably on the little terrace in front of the entrance gates, wondering, no doubt, why they had been called, and perhaps trembling a little, for most of them had been concerned in the plot to deliver up the town to the Huguenots. Presently the old man appeared, a letter in his hand. We know its contents, and can guess how the crowd felt when that death-warrant was read to them.

“Now,” said the Bishop, “you have heard the king's command. I have disobeyed it. What am I to do?”

It is said that they were so touched by his noble and generous conduct, that with one voice they abjured their heresy, and were re-admitted to their hereditary faith.

On our second evening at Le Puy there were fireworks in front of the Hôtel de Ville, and bands and dancing, for it was the fourteenth of July, when all good Frenchmen feel especially bound to let themselves go.

For an hour or more we stood waiting, squeezed into a vast compact human mass. But no one grumbled, save one old woman, who uttered a mild protest when I inadvertently trod on her; she explained that she had a most *effroyable* corn, or she would not have minded. And when the rockets began to soar, and the roman-candles to spout forth flames and balls of fire, what exclamations of delight! The last was a set piece representing the Republic, in red, white, and blue, surrounded by showers of golden rain, flames, bangs, bouquets of rockets, and falling stars. As an old woman beside me, not she of the corn, remarked: "You would have said the world was coming to an end! But what of that! Vive la République!" She had evidently seen many of these fêtes, and was somewhat critical, inclined to sniff at the number of rockets, and wonder whether the set pieces cost as much as they did last year. However, this last piece staggered her, and she went off with that self-satisfied expression which French people wear at such times. For their attitude is somewhat different to that of an English crowd, when looking on at an entertainment provided by the authorities. In France, the poorest beggar present regards himself as one of the authorities; therefore, in a way, responsible.

The whole thing belongs to him, is got up by him. He, in fact, is the Republic.

And now they are gone. I can hear the laugh of the last band of orderly roysterers dying away in the distance. The cafés have taken in their green tables and chairs and closed their doors. The myriads of gas-jets outlining the Hôtel de Ville have been extinguished, leaving it black and sombre like a great tomb. As I look at it, my thoughts fly back more than four hundred years to that terrible outbreak of plague which devastated Le Puy in 1482. All the crops had been destroyed by a fearful tempest, and famine had been at work, weakening the wretched inhabitants of Velay. So, when Madame La Peste arrived, she found a goodly meal awaiting her. More than eighteen thousand dead bodies are said to have been cast pell-mell into the trenches, which were open in the Place du Martouret, just where to-day stands the handsome town-hall. Finding such good entertainment, the dreadful visitor came again and again, and it was always in the Place du Martouret that the greater number of her victims were laid. And at every visit there came out to meet her the valiant Black Virgin, borne by her band of devoted clergy. My old friend at the cathedral told me that La Peste never failed to fly at sight of La Bonne Dame Noire. But as I thought of the number of her victims, it seemed that she left rather from satiety than fear!

Indeed, what has not this great Place seen? During the Wars of the League it was used as the place of execution, and many a time the old chapel of Saint Michel has looked down on rows of corpses swinging to and fro in the night breeze. But it is when we come to the time of the great Revolution, that the Place du Martouret showed itself most

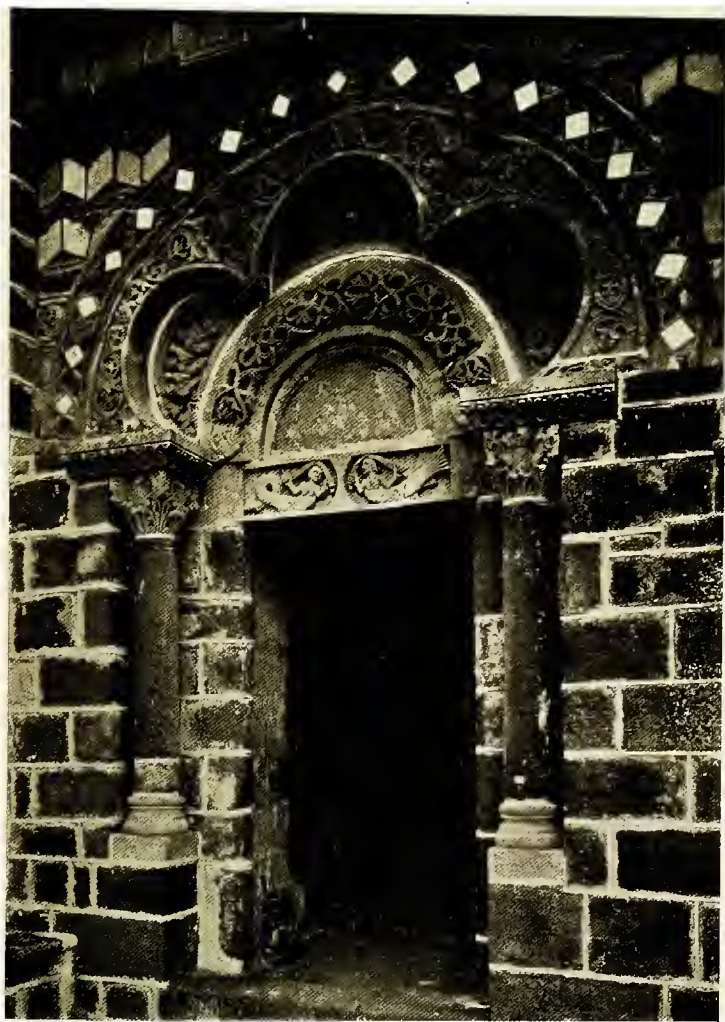


AN ANCIENT STATUE OF NOTRE DAME DU PUY

useful. Here was gathered the vast crowd to see Monsieur l'Abbé de Lavinhac, the renegade monk, celebrate the Mass, at which all the clergy were commanded to assist, wearing the tricolour. It must have been an extraordinary sight. Round the temporary altar were gathered the Republican soldiers, and the whole square was filled with a shouting mob. Even at the most solemn moment there was the greatest difficulty in restraining the cries, and no sooner had the monk ended the mock office, than there were storms of: VIVE LA NATION! VIVE LA LOI! VIVE LA LIBERTÉ! And as the priests came up one by one to take the oath of fidelity to the government, which was trampling underfoot everything they held sacred, drums and trumpets blazed out, and every eye was fixed upon them, to see whether or no they passed the ordeal like good patriots. And, finally, it was here that, on the 19th of January 1794, that ancient statue was brought, the Black Virgin who for so long had ruled for their good the people of Le Puy. Her golden robe had been stripped from her, and the wooden figure could be seen, the Mother seated on a kind of footstool, with her Son on her knees. And because they were Egyptian, they were represented bound about like mummies, the wrappings surrounding even the faces, hands, and feet. Painted they were, in a strange uncouth fashion, with symbols and hieroglyphics traced in gold and gems. And whatever we may think of such statues, it must have been a terrible sight to see this mysterious image, which for 539 years had attracted pilgrims from all over Europe, and which had also for untold ages been an object of love and adoration to an earlier people, insulted, spit upon by the yelling mob, and finally, burned within sight of the Cathedral which for so long had been its home.

Ah, well, it is over! Those first turbulent days of the Republic have given place to the quiet orderly France of to-day. Even the red lanterns have burned themselves out, and I am left alone, with the great Virgin of France looking down from the summit of the Rocher de Corneille, and above her the stars.

But how am I to tell all the story of Le Puy? When I came to this chapter I said to myself, It will be the best of all! I will show them the old valley, the strange cones rising in every direction, each crowned with its ancient worshipping place. I will take them up the 162 steps to the top of the Rock Aiguilhe, and visit the astounding chapel of Saint Michel, a growth rather than a building, for one can scarcely tell where rock ends and chapel begins. We will walk over the floor, which indeed is but the levelled top of the peak, and examine the low basalt columns, with weirdly carved capitals on a level with one's face. Then, if they are not giddy, they shall look down from the battlemented walls, and I will tell them the story of the girl who threw herself over, to escape the attentions of a soldier, and who was caught in the air by invisible hands, and gently lowered to the foot of the rock. And on the way back we will look in at the old Temple of Diana, and watch the lace-makers who always sit grouped around it, their tongues wagging to the clicking of their bobbins. In any case we *must* visit the church of Saint Laurent, for there, close beside the altar, we shall find the tomb of a very old Breton friend, Bertrand du Guesclin, Constable of France. There he lies, or rather some of him, for the greater part of his body, having been embalmed, was, according to Froissart, taken to Saint Denis, and buried at the foot of the tomb his master King Charles V. had raised for himself. The church,



THE DOORWAY OF THE CHAPEL OF ST. MICHEL

as we pass out of the sunlight, seems very dark, and we must wait a little before we can see the short burly figure, with the shield worn low on the left thigh, the folded hands, and large square head, with its crop of short curly hair. His beard and moustache too are closely cut, leaving the mouth, evidently his only beauty, exposed.

About three miles' walk over the hills lies the village of Polignac, where may still be seen the ruins of the ancient castle of that name.

It was a lovely day. We had been breakfasting in front of the hotel, close to the kitchen door, in company with the mastiff puppy and his mamma, a flock of tame pigeons, a grey parrot, several furtive cats, a cageful of chattering canaries, and five monkeys, whose comic faces and thin side whiskers, reminded me of certain mountain cowherds I had seen in Cantal.

Outside the door of the bureau, a few paces farther down the yard, sat Madame, her lace pillow on her knees, busily at work. Every one makes lace at Le Puy; from dawn to dusk the air is full of the sound of the clicking of bobbins. But as a rule Madame is too busy with other things to click, and only takes up her pillow *pour se distraire*, as she explains. Perhaps the untiring activity of Madame's agile fingers made me ashamed of my laziness, at all events I suggested at last that we should go for a walk.

"Where?" inquired my husband.

But before I had time to answer, Madame intervened.

"Ah, Monsieur, go to Polignac, I counsel you. Ma foi! one has seen nothing till one has seen Polignac!"

We were so fortunate as to fall in with the postman, who, as he was going our way, took us a short cut over the

saddle of hill which divides the valley of Le Puy from that of Polignac.

The path led through vineyards green with the freshness of early summer, while overhead the sky blazed down like a living sapphire. We had just passed through a tiny village called Monotaire, when, at the culminating point of the path we came to a calvary, on the steps of which several black-robed sisters had seated themselves. I can see them now, those gentle faces, and meek inquiring eyes, the snowy coifs flapping in the breeze like the wings of great white birds, the ancient cross outlined against the sky; and beyond, like the landscape of some Pre-Raphaelite painter, the broad valley of Polignac, with, in the mid distance, its vast cube of basalt, crowned by the ruined castle. I did not like to disturb the good women, for their lips were moving, and each was telling her beads. But just as I was going off, the eldest spoke to me, asking if I were not English. Then I sat by them a little and talked, letting my eyes wander over the landscape. It seemed that they had been obliged by the government to leave their home, situated somewhere in the valley, and were on their way to seek another, probably, like so many of their order, in our country. It seemed hard, for most of them were old, and would find it difficult to accustom themselves to foreign surroundings. But the word had gone forth, and so they were looking their last on this land, which was, for some of them, the only one they knew. The simple story, told without apparent feeling of resentment, gave a new significance to the landscape. How many people in former days, turned from their homes by the race of brigands who once dwelt in that castle on the rock, had from this very spot gazed their last on their native land? As I looked at the Sisters, I wondered what they were thinking

about, these childlike souls? Did the valley signify to them life, with its few joys and many troubles, and the distant hills that Paradise where alone they might find happiness?

At last we rose, wished them well, and began making our way down the hill. Then began a series of pictures for which the plates in our camera were all too few. Here, a fair-haired girl, far too pretty to have come of a race of peasants, and mounted astride on a mare, was driving the cows home to be milked. There, in a hayfield, the great cream-coloured oxen were taking their midday meal. And at the cottage doors what groups of old women, wearing the preposterous little dolls' hats of Velay, set on top of their caps! But I dare say they thought our costume just as funny, for they looked at us in our tweeds as though we were some wild animals escaped from the Jardin des Plantes!

At the Café Restaurant we lunched, assisted by two great hungry dogs, who came in useful when the sausage was served.

Along one of the beams hung a row of bottles, each with a white label covered with writing.

"What are those for?" I asked. And the daughter of the house replied that it was the custom at Polignac to hang up a bottle of wine whenever a young man went away to join the army.

"Look," said she, pointing, "that is for the fiancé of my sister, Anne Marie. He will finish his service next month, and then the bottle will be uncorked, and we shall all drink to his health."

"And this?" I asked, pointing to a dusty bottle, the label of which was yellow with age.

"Ah," said the girl, the dimples dying out of her cheeks, and her eyes darkening, "that was put up when my

brother Géraud went away. He died in Algérie : God rest his soul !”

“ But why do you not take it down, since he is gone ? ”

The girl looked round to see that we were alone. “ The old grandmother,” she said, “ it would kill her to know that she would never see Géraud again. He was her favourite, her only grandson. If we leave it she need never know till she meets him in Paradise.”

I looked at the other bottles, each bearing the name of a young man, and the regiment to which he had been drafted, and thought of all the tears and heartaches they represented. Some were only a few months old ; the owners of others had been away a year or more, and might soon be expected home, while here and there was one whose label was illegible with age and dust, and I could not but wonder what had become of the owner !

It was quite a little climb up to the castle, “ the nest,” as Jean Ajalbert has truly said, “ of that terrible race of vultures beneath whose ravages Velay and Auvergne once trembled.”

As we entered the outer gate, we were greeted by an old woman with twinkling black eyes, and little black loops of tightly plaited hair showing beneath her close white cap. She lived in a neat cottage, built in one corner of the courtyard from the debris of a fallen tower. The poor old thing had what my husband described as “ double congenital dislocation of the hip,” but was as merry and cheerful as a thrush, and went hobbling about the ruins, telling us endless tales of the FAMILY, spelt always with the biggest F to be found in her alphabet. And as she talked, the walls seemed to rise once more from their ruins. Here was the dining-hall where the Viscount Armand and his two sons, Pons and Eracles,



THE CUSTODIAN OF CHÂTEAU POLIGNAC

once held their wild revels. He was the worst of all the race, this Count Armand. It was he who set up toll gates on all the roads leading to Le Puy, demanding enormous sums from the pilgrims on their way to visit the Cathedral. At last the conduct of the Lords of Polignac became so unbearable, that the Bishop was obliged to take up arms against them, and, as they were generally detested, they were not able to face him, and were obliged to give hostages for their better conduct. But the same thing happened again and again, and the history of Polignac is a history of quarrels and civil wars between the Viscounts and the Bishops of Puy.

The foundation of the castle is so ancient, that no one has any certain theory as to its origin. In the rock which once formed the chapel floor, are five coffins hollowed in the basalt itself. There, through the ages, may have lain those mythical ancestors of the race, who claimed to be sons of the god Apollo. For the Polignacs, as their name signifies, boasted that to be their divine origin. In very ancient times, the chief of the tribe being also the priest, offered, on the rock, sacrifices to his great progenitor. Later, a temple was raised to Apollo, which no doubt was a great annoyance to the early Christian priests at Ruessium and Le Puy. In its midst was the pit or well, the great speaking-tube through which the priests uttered their famous oracles. There it is still, as practicable as in the days when the Emperor Claude came to consult the god.

As we leant over the stone parapet, the old woman told us how at the foot of the rock was a chamber, where, when the Oracle was still in working order, the pilgrims were accustomed to make their offerings and utter their request.

"I come to consult the god!" they would cry.

"And what would you learn of the god?" said a mysterious voice, as from the bowels of the earth, "for, Madame," explained the custodian, "the chamber communicated by a secret passage with another at the bottom of the well, where a priest was stationed." Then the momentous question was asked, the pilgrim admitted, conducted up to the temple, where he found other priests, who by that time had had the question passed on to them by means of the well, and were ready with the answer.

It was all so new to me, the idea of an Oracle to Apollo, here in Velay, that I suppose I looked incredulous.

"Come, Madame," said the old woman gravely, "and you shall see the god himself!" She led us to a square tower, and there he was, a huge stone mask, with open mouth, through which any number of Oracles might find their way.

"It lay upon the top of the well," said the guide. "Through it the priests made known the will of the god."

"I begin to understand," said my husband, "how the Counts of Polignac were such thorns in the sides of the Bishops of Puy."

But for myself I had given up trying to understand anything. I heard as though in a dream the legend of a certain Claude Armand of Polignac, who had a blind mule which he took to be healed by the Holy Nail of Chamalières, an insult which the nail resented by transferring the blindness from the beast to his master. And I listened to other tales of the doings of these Counts—of the Cardinal Melchior de Polignac, who was Archbishop of Auch, and wrote the Latin poem "Anti-Lucretius," and

of Prince Jules de Polignac, whose mother died of grief at the execution of Marie Antoinette.

But all the time I was looking at the great mask, and thinking of another Oracle of Apollo I had seen at Delphi, and of a mysterious stone with a hole in it through which they say the inspiration came to the Sybil seated on the golden tripod above.

CHAPTER X

Saint-Flour—The Coming of Saint Florus—The History of Saint-Flour — Ville Dieu — The Castle of Alleuze — Pierrefort — Carlat — Marguerite de Navarre

THE first time one sees Saint-Flour, one is reminded of the bristly head of some burly convict, so strangely do the buildings sprout up from the rounded mass of rock on which it stands. The town has been called "An Eagle's Nest," the "Crown of Planèze," the "Key of High Auvergne"; but I prefer my convict metaphor, there is something so rugged about the old place, so black and forbidding withal. How Florus, Bishop of Lodève, ever made up his mind to settle there, is a mystery. Perhaps, if it is true that he was one of the seventy-two disciples sent out by our Lord, the sight of the old Gaulish city high up in the clouds, recalled another mount in far away Judea, where he had listened to the words: "A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid!"

And why should we not believe the beautiful legend? I may as well confess at once that I am very slow to give up my faith in these old traditions. I love the story told by Jacques Branche, of the good Bishop and of the vision he saw of the wild mountains of Auvergne, where men were yet wandering "among the abominable precipices of idolatry, and in imitation of the Druids, worshipping oaks and elms." The very words breathe the atmosphere of Saint Flour. The legend continues that, rising from sleep, he took with him eleven of the converts he had brought



THE SUBURB AND TOWN OF SAINT-FOUR

from Lodève, his first halting-place, and set off on his travels to find the unknown country of his dreams. It was a wild desolate region they had to cross, even to-day it is arid and bare. At last the little band sank down with fatigue, declaring that they could go no farther. Then Florus, after the manner of the saints from Moses downward, struck the rock and a spring appeared. But he himself could not rest. Perhaps something in the prospect reminded him of his vision, and told him he was nearing the place. Leaving his disciples sleeping beside the well, he set off by himself. The farther he went, the more familiar became the scene, till at last he recognized the landscape of his dream. There was the picturesque, though sombre, plateau, sheltered on the north and west by the mountains of Cantal; and there in the midst stood the very hill, surrounded on all sides by rocks, the hill Indiciat, which had been pointed out to him as the scene of his future labours. Hurrying back to his friends, he told them the news, and they were soon clambering up the narrow path leading to the mount.

Such is the legend, and if you ask for proof, the old folk will show you the place where the rock was miraculously opened to form an entrance for the saint: Porte Fraisse it is called. And if still you doubt, is there not the mark of a gigantic hand, said to have been left by our Florus as he pushed back the rock? Until a very few years ago, no one failed to kneel and kiss this imprint when the procession paid its annual visit to the Sacred Fountain.

Whatever may have been the precise date of Florus, certain it is that the Mount itself was a place of habitation from earliest times. Its name, "Indiciat," is said to signify a beacon, and taking into consideration the situation of

the place, the first buildings must assuredly have been an inn for travellers, and a primitive kind of lighthouse, or porte-flambeau, to guide them among the winding paths of the forests and mountains.

It is probable that by the time Saint Florus arrived, a town had sprung up, a noted meeting-place for strangers, the very spot an enterprising missionary would select, for from it the gospel would be carried in every direction. So, as an old writer has said : "Indiciat remained a beacon, guiding souls from the dark shadow of death to a place of light and safety."

The first Christian building raised on the Mount was nothing more than a humble oratory, served by the eleven followers of Florus, and after them by a band of Poor Brothers, who devoted themselves to the pilgrims who resorted in great numbers to pray on the tomb of the saint. It was not until the year 996 that the great monastery was founded, the church of which, replacing the little oratory, became the forerunner of the present cathedral.

I am afraid my readers will think I am always talking about saints. It is impossible to ignore them in writing of the origin of most French towns, they played so important a part in the civilization of Gaul. However, in the present instance, the Monastery owed its origin to a couple of sinners rather than saints. Both bore the name of Amblard, Amblard Count of Brezons, surnamed Le Mal Hiverné, and Amblard that very Comptour of Apchon who ran away with a nun.¹ Both owned property at Indiciat, and each happened to have killed one of his cousins. Even in those days the double murder made a sensation, and the two nobles found themselves obliged to set out for

¹ See page 131.

Rome to beg forgiveness of the Pope. Now the fame of Saint Florus at Indiciat had come to the Pope's ears, so, finding that the two culprits owned land there, it seemed to him a favourable opportunity for perpetuating the memory of the saint. He forgave them on the understanding that they made over their estates to the Holy See, at the same time commissioning Odilon, Bishop of Cluny, who happened to be staying in Rome, to take possession and build a monastery on the site of the humble oratory of former days.

There is an old story told at Saint-Flour of the arrival of the two penitents, how they came barefoot and weary, and how the priest Adalbert walked out to them, bearing bread and water. Not so long ago, there was an ancient ash tree, beneath which the meeting is said to have taken place, for the sinners dared not enter a town till they had made their peace with the Church. So there they ate and drank; and, as they had asked for no remission of the fine imposed upon them, the matter was considered settled and the monastery commenced. Three hundred years later, Saint-Flour, as it had come to be called, was created a bishopric by the Pope, then living at Avignon, and became a place of great importance, visited by kings and queens. Then the English began devastating Auvergne, and it was to Saint-Flour that the country people fled for refuge, for, standing as it does on its height, it is the Acropolis of the district, and against its basalt foundations the waves of battle dashed themselves in vain.

In fact Saint-Flour is a true virgin city. She has never been taken, though indeed she has been the object of numberless attempts. The English wooed her in their rough rude fashion, but she would have nothing whatever to say to them. They burned her suburbs, and established

themselves in most of the strong castles of the neighbourhood, and the little town not only took care of herself, but sent two hundred horsemen to serve under that other maid, Jeanne d'Arc, in the rescue of the less happily situated town of Orleans.

And when the war was over, Charles the Seventh came, bringing with him, according to the curious custom of the time, La Belle des Belles, Madame Agnès Sorel.

There are many stories about this visit, indeed I think that the virgin town was a little shocked at the coming of so naughty a person as Agnès: while the king was entertained in the monastery, she had to lodge in a street which still bears her name.

An amusing tale is told of the king's sudden fancy for a young Sanflorianne, one Marguerite Bédon: how, when he went to visit her, he found his mistress there before him, and the young lady and her father warned in time, and so retired discomfited.

As for Saint-Flour, she remained faithful to her first love Florus, the only man who ever conquered her. He had taught her the Catholic creed, and she never abandoned it. Even when Henry the Fourth ascended the throne, she refused to acknowledge him till he had abjured his Protestantism, and returned to the faith of his fathers. Then, and not till then, she sent a deputation to Paris to assure him of her undying loyalty.

But when the Revolution came, then indeed poor Saint-Flour suffered grievously. The great bell of the Cathedral, Marie-Thérèse, was hurled from its tower, though not even then could it be broken, so massive was it cast:

" Je m'appelle Marie-Thérèse,
Cinq cents quintaux je pèse ;

Qui ne veut pas me croire me pèse,
Me repèse et me mette à mon aise.”¹

Then, too, probably it was that the great metal Christ was taken from the cross where he had so long hung, marking the spot where the first missionary had preached to the travellers who came and went on old Mount Indiciat. From all accounts it must have been a weird old figure, with a hole in the side through which the wind used to whistle, giving rise to the saying :

“ Hou ! hou ! hou !
Le bon Dieu de Saint-Floû ! ”

And now the town has settled down to the life of an old maid. Perched prudishly up on her hill, she still keeps herself out of the way of tourists, though indeed there is little to attract them. The Cathedral, though ancient, is bare and plain, having even to my eyes nothing very interesting, save a huge cross with a black figure of our Saviour upon it. And the great houses with their barred windows, the many convents, the narrow dark streets, give the town the appearance of a fortress. All the life has gone down to the river, where, with its railway station, lies the bustling, noisy suburb. Here, in the church of Saint Cristine, may still be seen the statue of Notre Dame de Frédière, probably one of the band of Black Virgins so distinctive of the Church in Auvergne. From early times this image has been held in great veneration, and many stories are told of the cures effected at the shrine. Most of the patients are children. One, a little boy of eight, had never spoken. His parents at last made up their minds to take him to Notre Dame.

¹ “ L’Auvergne,” by Jean Ajalbert p. 228.

The effect on the child was instantaneous. No sooner had he caught sight of the image than he cried out: "Oh, how beautifully they have dressed her!" and from that moment spoke as distinctly as anyone could wish.

During the Revolution, the image found shelter in the house of a Sanflorian named Rodier Jean-Baptiste, who hid it in a mill, and afterwards under an empty hive. Dying, he left the secret to his daughter, Elizabeth Rodier, who finally, when things had settled down, gave the statue back to the church.

A few miles to the south-west of Saint-Flour lies Ville Dieu, to-day a tiny village, but once a favourite resort of the Bishops of Saint-Flour. Indeed one of them, Pierre d'Estaing, was so fond of the place that he wished to build himself a palace there, and was only deterred by the Sanflorians, who declared that they feared for his safety out in that open country, overrun as it then was by the English.

I had heard that there was at Ville Dieu a celebrated statue of the Virgin. Old Jacques Branche gives the story of its discovery in such quaint language that I will quote his words. "I should find it difficult to believe," says he, "that oxen, stupid, heavy creatures as they are, could have had the wit to show a labourer the image of Our Lady of Ville Dieu hidden among the brambles and bushes, and that this image being carried in procession to Saint-Flour, was several times divinely brought back to its former place, so that the people rebuilt their parish church in order to house it more honourably, had I not read another history of the kind about another portrait of Our Lady."

Of the church so built, only the lower part of the tower

remains together with some ancient ironwork, and the Sacred Well.

Bishop d'Estaing, inspired by that fatal passion for rebuilding, which has always characterised the clergy, destroyed the older church to make room for the new. Yet what a weird place it is! The tower with its open arch, within which can be seen the two chapels one above another, the solid oak screen running like a wall across the nave, perhaps intended to act as a barricade in case of surprise by English or Huguenots. On its flat top the most grotesque of little wooden statues, no doubt carried in procession on festival days, and which I shall always regret not having photographed. Above all, fixed high up on the north side of the altar, a Wheel of Fortune!

"What do you use that wheel for?" I asked the girl who was dusting the church.

She replied that it was the Sacrament bell, and was used as such. But it is probably a survival of the worship of the goddess Fortuna.

"I have heard my grandmother say," continued the girl, after staring at the Wheel in silence for some minutes, "that when she was young, Monsieur le Curé would turn the Roue de la Fortune for anyone who paid two sous to the Saint of the Wheel."

"And when was it done?" I asked.

"I think it was during the Mass," said the girl, "but I'm not sure, I've forgotten."

"And you call it La Roue de la Fortune?"

"Yes, that is its name."

"And the Saint of the Wheel?"

She pointed to one of the little painted wooden statues on the screen, but it was quite indefinite, dressed, I think,

as a bishop. Then finding me a good listener, she showed me the well, almost in the middle of the nave, just where the school children sit.

"It is a good thing they have put a stone over it," said I. "Anyone might easily tumble in."

"That is why there is a stone. It was put there because a girl did fall in." She went on to tell me the story of Catherine, who was so interested in watching the little image of the man and his oxen, which used to be exhibited to the people on festival days, to remind them of the ancient legend, that she walked right into the well, and would certainly have been drowned had not the water suddenly risen to the level of the floor, bearing her with it, so that Monsieur le Curé was able to take her by the hand and draw her out.

Altogether Ville Dieu is a very strange place, full of curious legends, which to our civilized minds seem to have little or no significance.

For instance, there is the Puy on which, despite all efforts to cultivate it, nothing whatever will grow. And the reason? Well, once there was a farmer living there, who kept bees. Hearing that the best way to prevent them from over-swarming was to put a bit of consecrated wafer into the hive, he determined to try the experiment. So on Sunday, as soon as he had received the Good God, he rose from his knees, and hurried off to the hive, where he stooped and tried to blow it in at the door. Unfortunately it fell to the ground. Immediately, however, the bees crowded out, and reverently lifting it, carried it into the hive. Off went the farmer to his work. But presently he felt a pang of conscience. Was not this sacrilege he had committed? And if so what was to become of him? Full of fear he hurried back to the hive, which he plunged in water till all the poor bees,

not one of which was to blame for his sin, were drowned. But being an Auvergnat he was of an economical turn, and did not like the idea of losing the honey and wax. So turning up the hive he began emptying it, when at the door, just where he had expected to find the morsel of wafer, there lay a child, white and dead. It was the Good God Himself he had killed. Terrified, the man caught up the little body, and was about to bury it, when it vanished utterly, and so fearful was the crime, that everyone in the place died ; it was as though Madame la Peste herself had twisted their necks with her bony fingers. And since then, nothing has ever grown on the Puy de Ville Dieu, and nothing ever will ! Now what is one to make of a legend like that, or of the people who invented it ?

At the time when the Black Plague was visiting Saint-Flour, the inhabitants vowed a yearly pilgrimage to Our Lady of Ville Dieu. Little by little the godly custom has been abandoned, though as late as eight or ten years ago, the White Penitents of Saint-Flour would still march out in procession on the Sunday of the Good Shepherd, and pay their vows to La Bonne Mère.

Beyond Ville Dieu the road becomes a mere track, winding its way among dwarf pines and oaks, which rise out of a mass of tangled undergrowth. It is a most desolate spot, and the more so for the memories which haunt it of La Bête du Gévaudan. Everybody has some story to tell of this mysterious beast, who was quite a "gourmet," with a taste for the prettiest and tenderest children of Gévaudan and Auvergne. He seems to have had a preference for little girls, and devoured so many that in 1764 and 1765 their names made quite a goodly show in the parish registers. All the noted huntsmen of the time turned out to chase

him, but without avail, and the stories which got about, that the BEAST was invulnerable, a were-wolf, a something altogether beyond nature, did not help to quiet the terror of the peasants.

At last, on 21st September 1765, the President Roosevelt of that time, Monsieur Antoine, the King's Huntsman, killed a gigantic wolf, 5 feet 7 inches long, and weighing 150 pounds, a beast which certainly accounted for a good many little girls. A month later his mate was taken, and one by one his offspring. But stories of La Bête are still told to children of Saint-Flour, to prevent their loitering on their way back from school, and there is still to be seen on nights of storm, a phantom huntsman clothed in flaming red, driving his baying hell-hounds through the forest.

For ourselves we saw nothing alive in the wood, whose soil is too poor to provide decent living for a worm. Gradually the trees themselves ceased, and we found ourselves out on the bare rock, the nose of our car looking down into a deep intricate valley, from whose depths rose the steep conical hill, crowned by the Castle of Alleuze. It needed our utmost care, and every possible form of brake we could contrive, to avoid an accident. At last, we landed on a ledge of rock, which, though occupied by two or three cottages, and a calvary, left room for us to turn. The wild looking woman who came out and stared at us, told us that the road went on down into the valley toward Pierrefort, but after looking at it, we preferred to take our chance of climbing back to Ville Dieu. Before doing so, however, we went to visit the castle.

Grey it is, grey as the bare rock on which it stands. The sky was grey also, for a storm was coming up, and



AN OLD WOMAN OF AUVERGNE

heavy black clouds were pushing and shouldering one another across the darkening vault. Forming a background to the castle, was a curtain of black pine trees, all the valley from top to bottom was lined with them, only in the midst, as though thrown up in a single jet, was the grey hill, with its ghostly grey ruin. It would be too theatrical for a painter, no one would believe it! No wonder the Beast chose it as a lair.

We had just set up our camera when the storm broke, and we had to cover it up, and wait on the cornice path which creeps along the side of the valley wall.

"Do you see anyone beside the gate?" asked my husband, who had been peering over at the castle.

"I'm not sure," said I. "I think I do."

"Ever since we set up the camera a man has been sitting there. I suppose it must be inhabited."

The woman, her skirt turned over her head because of the rain, had come out to watch the performance.

"Is there anyone living at the castle?" I asked.

"No, no! Not a soul!" said she, and her eyes followed those of my husband. "The gentlefolk see someone?" she inquired.

"We thought so."

"Ah, possibly," said she indifferently. "It has its history, the château. They say a man was killed there when sitting by the door. It is probably he himself."

"Nonsense!" said my husband, "that's no ghost. It's some shepherd sheltering from the rain."

Well, we took the picture, and the storm presently clearing a little, climbed down the path to the stream, and struggled up the rough cone to the ruin. I confess my

heart beat a little faster as I approached the entrance. But there was nothing there.

"He must be inside," said my husband blankly. "I saw him only a moment ago."

Yet search as we would we could find no one, not even the ghost of the porter, shot here by the cross bow of Amerigot Marché's Breton archer. We reminded each other of the story, as we looked up into the empty shell, which is all that is left of "Aloise." No doubt you remember it, but in case you have forgotten, here is the old legend told in Froissart's matchless words :

"Amerigot made one day an excursion to seek adventures, and took the road toward Aloise near Saint-Flour, which has a handsome castle, in the bishopric of Clermont ; and they knew that castle was guarded only by the porter. As they were riding silently toward Aloise" (on the very path from which we had taken our photograph), "Amerigot spies the porter, sitting on the trunk of a tree withoutside of the castle. A Breton, who shot extraordinarily well with the cross bow, says to him : 'Would you like to have that porter killed at a shot?' 'Yes,' replied Amerigot, 'and I beg you will do so.' Then the cross bowman shoots a bolt, which he drives into the porter's head, and knocks him down. The porter, feeling himself mortally wounded, regains the gate, which he attempts to shut, but cannot, and falls down dead. So Amerigot and his companions hasten to the castle, which they enter by the wicket, and there they see the porter lying dead, and his wife distracted beside him. They do her no harm, but inquire where the Constable of the castle is, and learning that he is in Clermont, promise to spare her life, if she will give them the keys of the castle and of the dungeon, which, when she had done,

they shut her out, having given her what belonged to her, and indeed as much as she could carry away. And she went to Saint-Flour, which is but a league off, where the inhabitants were much frightened, as well as all the adjoining country, when they heard that Aloise was become English."

We were rather thoughtful as we came out of the ancient gateway, and looked at the spot where the porter had been seated. What was it we had seen?

Then I fell thinking of Amerigot's words with regard to this same Aloise, and his regret for having sold it, as he did later.

"How happy we were when, riding out in search of adventures, we met a rich abbot, a merchant, a string of mules well laden with draperies, furs, and spices. . . . Every day we gained money. The peasants of Auvergne and Limousin loved us, and provided our castle with corn, meal, baked bread, litter for our horses, . . . good wine, fat beeves, sheep, and all sorts of poultry. We lived like kings, and when we went abroad the country trembled."

I have no doubt it did. But oh, Amerigot, how about the people loving you!

Our automobile had a great struggle after we left the Calvary of Alleuze. She is a long-suffering gentlemanly car, but she grumbled audibly at the 15 or 16 per cent. climb over bare bed rock, till at last growling angrily, she lowered her head and went for it! However, no sooner did she once more feel herself in safety, than she began humming again in her pleasant cheery manner, and by the time we had regained the highroad, was as happy as ever.

Later we passed Pierrefort, with its ruined castle and

memories of Tristan Volpilière, and that charming heroine Guillemine de Fontanges. I have heard a story somewhere of how they ran away together, and were besieged in this very castle by her father. It was on these old battlements that Guillemine used to show herself every day, hoping that the sight would move the besiegers to pity, so that they would leave her and her lover in peace. And after it was all over, and her father had vindicated his parental authority, it was back to this castle she came as a bride, and no doubt often sat at those very windows, looking down over the roofs of the little town stretched out like a fan at foot of the rock.

Finally in an intricate valley we come upon Carlat, lying high on the hillside, and above it the foundations of that great castle, once the strongest citadel of Auvergne. But only the foundations. In the church, curious old building that it is, you will find the record of the destruction of the fortress. It was ordered by Henry IV. and carried out by the Sieur de Giou.

We had left the storm behind at Alleuze, and the evening sun was warm and bright. Beside the door of a vine-draped cottage, just above the church, sat an old old man. He was so very old, his blue eyes so dim, his long fine hair so silvery white, that he might almost have been one of those shepherds, whose heads Marguerite de Valois turned so cruelly, during her visit to Carlat. She was in a pitiful enough state when she arrived, for she had been riding night and day to escape from her husband's soldiers, and had not even a change of linen. But Marguerite never found much difficulty in getting what she wanted, and soon had, not only clothes, but young fair-haired footmen, whose heads supplied her with extra curls, and as for lovers, it is well known that she picked them up wherever

she went as readily as blackberries. The old man prattled on of "La Reine Margot" as if he had indeed known her in his youth.

"Eh, Madame," said he with a sly wink, "but she was a beauty, was Queen Margot. Bon Dieu what a misfortune it was she and her husband could not agree. But the Béarnois are always like that. No doubt the Good God made them so, but it must be a sad life for their wives. I have heard that even when our gracious lady consented to forgive him, and return to Nérac, he made her weep before dinner was over, and next day sent for one of his countesses to bear him company. Is it a wonder that the queen ran away, and took refuge with her own people of Auvergne? Is she to be blamed for that?"

"But it was scarcely her place to raise an insurrection against her husband," I observed. The old man sniffed disdainfully.

"Her husband!" said he. "Truly a pretty husband this Prince of Béarn! With all her faults our Queen was worth ten of him!"

As he ended, the old fellow rose, and led the way up the steep wall of rock, by little paths overgrown with wild rose and honeysuckle, till we came to the towers in the outer wall, huge fortifications jutting out of the basalt cliff on which the castle once stood. I say once, for as we reach the top, the vast smooth rectangular space is seen to be bare as a tennis court. One can just trace the walls, the position of the towers and windows, or fancies one can; and here and there is a hole leading down to some forgotten dungeon. But for the rest it is a blank. Truly the Sieur de Giou used the 12,000 livres, given him by Henri, well.

But what a fortress must this have been! It was Nature

herself who prepared its foundations. In travelling about Auvergne one becomes accustomed to the sight of these great black rocks, thrown up ages ago by the powers which fashioned this strange land. Sometimes, the columns which form them are so regular in shape, that you would vow they were the work of those Cyclops who built the many pillared Tiryns. But it was long before the time of Tiryns that this rock was laid down; and ever since the powers of nature have been at work, expanding, contracting, splitting, washing, smoothing, sculpturing, till there it stands to-day, a vast black rectangular pedestal; the top, flat as a paving stone, level as the surface of that great stream of liquid lava which once flowed over the country.

Then came the Romans, fortifying the already impregnable height, and raising a fortress which gave a world of trouble later to the Kings of France. Clovis came and besieged it vainly; and though Louis le Débonnaire took it in 839, it cost him more than it was worth. Later it was lost to that ubiquitous brigand, Amerigot Marché, of whom we are constantly hearing. Of any one of these periods Carlat has stories to tell. But it is not of them that we think as we look around.

In the midst of what must once have been the courtyard, stands an ancient lime tree, so venerable that in its youth it may have sheltered the beautiful Marguerite. As we seated ourselves beneath it, my eyes wandered away over miles and miles of mountains, the blue hills of Cantal, the Montes Celtorum of the ancients.

There at least nothing has changed. A lark springs up, singing the very song his far away ancestor sang to that strange daughter of the Valois, as she lay in bed, resting after the long ride from Agen, and waiting for the much-

needed supplies of money and clothes, she had sent to beg from her brother-in-law Philip II. of Spain. Poor Margot, when at last the messengers returned, very little of what they brought reached her, for Governor Lignerac and Chaplain Choisin claimed the lion's share. And when she remonstrated, the former actually forced himself into her chamber, and had to be driven away with blows, vowing vengeance as he went. No wonder the Queen dreaded him.

How the leaves of the lime tree rustle! What are they whispering about! Surely of that summer day, when, wandering sadly among the valley meadows, the beautiful Queen came upon the peasant Jean, feeding his sheep beside the river. These Valois must always be making war or love, and as for the moment Marguerite was not engaged in the former, she fell a ready victim to the latter. Perhaps it was then she first murmured the verse:

“A ces bois, ces prez et ces antres,
Offrons les vœux, les pleurs, les sons,
La plume, les vers, les chansons
D'un poète, d'un amant, d'un chantre!”

And Jean de Résigade, as he was afterwards called? No doubt she seemed to him a goddess, or one of those *Fados de Fareire*, who in those days dwelt in the marvellous grottos among the basalt columns. And so in return he sang her his shepherd's song. . . . Stop! . . . the old man beside me has taken out his pipe, and is crooning it in his quavering voice:

“Per los cans d'en Douno,
L'yo de giontos flours,
De flugos, de rougio,
De toutes coulours.

E si yeou l'i onabe
 N'en culirio bé,
 O lo miono amio
 N'en pourtario bé."

I don't know whether Marguerite understood the old language of Auvergne, but it is probable, since her grandmother was an Auvergnate. For myself I found the translation later.¹

"In the fields beside the stream
 There are pretty flowers growing,
 Flowers blue and flowers red,
 Flowers of all colours blowing,
 And if I should wander there,
 I will pluck those flowers sweet,
 I will pluck them, I will bring them,
 I will cast them at your feet."

As the old man ends he points away to the right, where down in the valley I can see a building.

"It is the Castel de Cabanes!" he says, "the château the Queen had built for her shepherd lover. From her tower here she could see it and make signals to him."

"That was very naughty!" said I, shaking my head.

"Perhaps, Madame! But the times were different. And moreover she was a queen and needed distraction."

"And pray how long did all this go on?" said I.

"Oh, for some time. And to be sure there were others. There was the son of the apothecary, who was murdered in her very chamber by the governor, who himself was

¹ "L'Auvergne," by Jean Ajalbert, p. 277.



THE POSTERN ENTRANCE TO THE CASTLE OF CARLAT.

Épris ! Bah ! what a brute that governor was ! To stab the young man so that he fell on the bed, covering the poor lady with his blood ! Could they not have found a better opportunity ? And then d'Aubiac. Ah, but that was a more serious affair.

I waited hoping to hear more, but the old man seemed to have fallen into a reverie, and it was the leaves that whispered the rest of the story. They told me of the meeting at Agen, when the youth seeing the queen for the first time exclaimed : "Oh, the lovely creature ! If I might only be so happy as to please her, how gladly would I die an hour later !" and he had his wish. This old lime tree, or its father, has often listened to the love-songs she composed in his honour, sung by choirs of village children, while she sat twanging her lute. A year and a half later, the Queen, fearing for her safety, determined to escape from Carlat, taking d'Aubiac with her.

I had risen from my seat, and was peering around trying to find some trace of La Tour de Margot, or the convent, or the little cemetery, or any of the other buildings they say once lay within the walls, when I heard my husband calling to me.

"Look !" said he, pointing downward, "that must be the way she went."

It was a crack in the basalt, a dark narrow fissure, fitted with a flight of rough stone steps. I cannot express the feelings with which I clambered down this ancient secret staircase, haunted if ever a place is haunted ! Before I had reached the bottom, where once stood the hidden postern gate, I was Margot herself, creeping down fearfully, followed by the lover-secretary. Instinctively I drew my skirt closer, afraid lest its rustle against the black rock should betray me to the sentinel above.

Now we have reached the bottom, are crossing the valley, knocking at the door of Le Château de Cabanes. . . .

They say it was Jean de Résigade himself who opened it, and there the lovers remained hidden, till the way was open to Pestels, where Marguerite knew she would be safe for a time, in the house of her friend Camille de Fontanges, wife of le Marquis de Miramont.

As to d'Aubiac, his end is well known. He followed his royal mistress to the castle of Usson, near Issoire, where for a time they remained in peace. But the Marquis de Canillac, the governor, becoming jealous of the secretary, had him taken to Aigueperse, where he was condemned to be strangled. And as he walked to the scaffold, he held in his hands a blue velvet cuff which he kissed and kissed as his tears fell upon it. And even with the cord around his neck, he could be heard murmuring the name of his adored lady, . . . and so died!

Si quelque curieux, informé de ma plainte,
S'étonne de me voir si vivement atteinte,
Répondez seulement, pour prouver qu'il a tort,
Le bel Alys est mort !

Alys, de qui la perte attriste mes années,
Alys, digne des vœux de tant d'âmes bien nées,
Que j'avais élevé pour montrer aux humains
Une œuvre de mes mains.

Si je cesse d'aimer, qu'on cesse de prétendre
Je ne veux désormais être prise, ne prendre,
Et consens que le ciel puisse estindre mes feux,
Car rien n'est digne d'eux.

Cet amant de mon cœur, qu'une éternelle absence
Éloigne de mes yeux, non de ma souvenance ;
A tiré quand et soy, sans espoir de retour,
Ce que j'avais d'amour.

(Chanson de la Reine Margot.)

CHAPTER XI

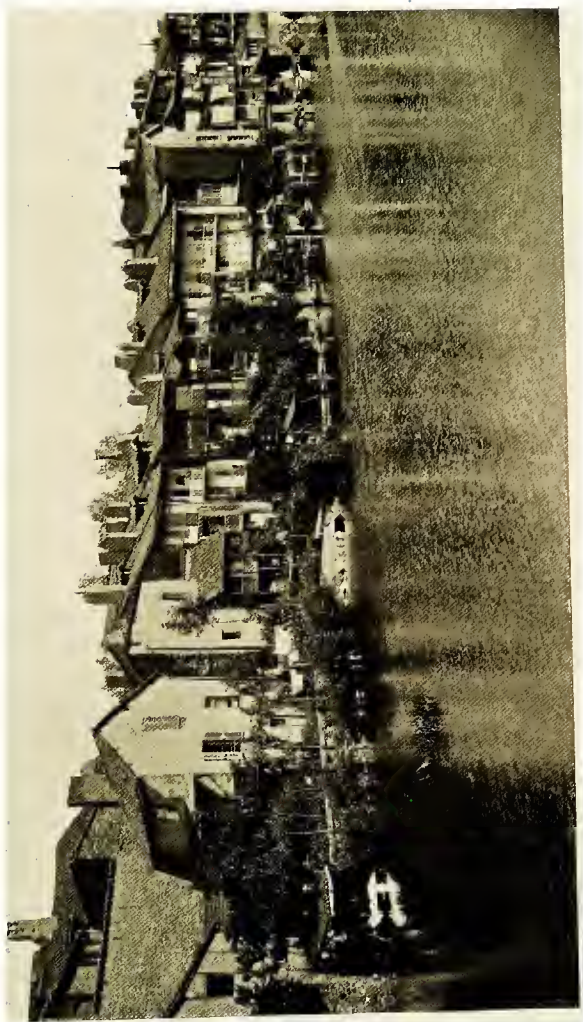
Aurillac—Saint-Géraud—The Legend of Gerbert the Wizard—The Story of Guy de Veyre—The Black Virgin of Aurillac—Marie de Senectère—The Bourrée—Vermeuzen the Poet of Auvergne.

HERE I am, sitting in my comfortable bedroom at the Hôtel Saint Pierre, enjoying a rest after the long day's motoring. Below, runs the broad busy quay, (if anything can be said to be busy in "lazy Aurillac"), and beyond the quay is the river Jordanne. The first sight of Aurillac, although charming, is not impressive. I love ancient towns, with narrow winding streets, and overhanging gables. Even their squalor is picturesque, and their many odours suggestive. Such towns may be unhealthy to live in, but they are delightful to visit.

"I doubt if we shall find even a photograph here," said I, as we turned into Le Gravier, with its well-kept walks and handsome statue of General Delzous. "It all looks so terribly clean and modern." And indeed, I found later that the people of Aurillac pride themselves upon being up-to-date. They are always cleaning up, pulling down, rebuilding, till there is scarcely a genuine old monument in the place.

Yet here, we are in the heart of Cantal, in a town with a history as interesting as that of any in Le Centre.

While I sat there, disconsolately looking down on the river, I forgot the story which that very stream has to tell.



THE RIVER JORDANNE AT AURILLAC

It began ages ago, with the first Gaulish Celts who found their way here. These people invariably settled in clans, retaining their family traditions and affections. Their quarrels were many and violent, but they were family quarrels. They were ruled by magistrates chosen by themselves, who had the duty of apportioning the land to each household. Each clan had its own laws or "customs." It was a patriarchal state of things, well-suited to the country and the times, and later, when the Romans arrived, they had the good sense to leave the laws of Cantal little changed. But after the Romans came the Franks, with their domineering Teuton methods, and a bad time began for the easy-going pastoral people. "No land without a lord! No lord without a title!" was the cry of these invaders. On every hilltop a Frankish chief settled himself, and, with a rod of iron, ruled over all the land he could see from his lofty perch. It was hard on the peasants, who, after all, were the real owners, but they made little resistance. The Celts have never been able to combine under one leader, so they gradually fell into more and more abject slavery. Every little clan was from henceforth dominated by a fortress, where the foreign usurper lived, and batted on the misery of his wretched slaves. Of course this was the same, more or less, all over France, but Auvergne, being particularly difficult of access, on account of its mountains, was the most notoriously down-trodden and oppressed province in the kingdom.

The first star in the people's firmament arose in 856. Do you see that square tower up there on the height? It is La Tour du Château St Étienne, all that is left of the Castle of Aurillac, once the home of Saint Géraud. He was the only son of a race which, according to his

biographer, Odon, Abbot of Cluny, "eclipsed all the other families of Gaul." Among his ancestors were reckoned Constantine the Great, Clovis, Charlemagne, and a host of other kings and saints, too numerous to mention. It was this young patrician, who made of down-trodden Aurillac, one of the earliest municipalities in France, and his story reads like that of some modern Christian socialist.

There is the freeing of the serfs, a marvellous act in those days, and one which brought down on him infinite ridicule and opposition. Then followed the division of his estates into small holdings, or farms, on each of which he settled a family. There they lived, much as the old Celtic clans had lived before the coming of the Franks, regaining the lost independence they had once enjoyed. And there their descendants may still be found.

Then Géraud, being still encumbered with much of this world's goods, turned his attention to the building of monasteries. At Aurillac, he had a good deal of difficulty about the security of the foundations, and the workmen became so discouraged, that once, at least, they struck. But the Saint knew how to conciliate them as well as any President of the Local Government Board, and, at last, the great basilica stood there complete, with its cloisters, and hospitals, and lodgings for pilgrims, all surrounded by the fortifications, which, in those days, were so necessary; and watched over by the castle, in which the Saint himself had been born. You can picture it all again, if you go to the church of Saint Géraud, for there you are on the very spot where the ancient abbey once stood.

Every 13th of October the festival of the good young

Count of Aurillac is celebrated, and his bones, some of the few relics which escaped the ravages of the Revolution, are carried in procession through the town. And everyone talks about him, for he is a well-known character in Cantal, one of those patriot saints canonized by Rome, because she found him already enshrined in the memory and affections of the people. How many of the legends told of him are actually true, and how many merely symbolical, is difficult to determine. One of the most curious is a certain love story, of which I have heard many variants. Here is the form as it came from the young girl Lucile, who waited on me, and who might have been the heroine, so pretty she was, with her deep grey eyes, fair skin, and masses of light chestnut hair.

It seems that one of Géraud's tenants had a charming daughter called Ébroïne. During his lonely walks the young lord had often met this girl, and the sight of her beauty had given him pleasure, for everything beautiful was to him sacred, reminding him of the divine, from which all beauty has its birth. Again and again he came across her, plucking the flowers or sitting with her work beside the stream, and Ébroïne no doubt was pleased with the attentions of this handsome young lord, who, with his tall graceful figure, bright dark eyes, golden hair, and face as fair as a lily, differed so from the young men of her class. They would sit by the hour talking together, always innocently, as a couple of angels might have done.

"But Madame knows what men are!" sagely observed Lucile, shaking her head.

Little by little Géraud's feelings for the young girl underwent a change. If he did not see her during his walk, he became dull and irritable, and horribly jealous

if he heard her mention any other young man. And then came the realization of what it all meant.

It was evening, and he was wandering by the banks of the Jordanne. All day he had seen nothing of Ébroïne, and his face was gloomy as he thought of her. Suddenly he stopped. From behind a group of willows came a song, a song he had often heard her sing, as they loitered hand in hand through the forest. Softly he crept nearer, till, on lifting a branch, he saw the beautiful girl leaning over the stream, smiling and singing to her own reflection in the water. For a moment he watched her, then turning, fled away as though a fiend were at his heels. For days he wandered in the woods, praying, crying aloud, beating his breast, struggling against this temptation which beset him. At last, unable to bear it longer, he felt he must see her once more, if only to say good-bye. Hastening to the cottage, he knocked. The door was opened by her mother, who stood curtsying and smiling. "Yes, Ébroïne was in the kitchen. Would Monsieur be pleased to enter." He found the maiden standing by the open window, through which the stars could be seen, for it was night. As she heard his footsteps, she turned, "A star has just fallen," she said, "a soul has passed from Purgatory to Paradise." Her eyes met his. Suddenly his outstretched arms fell, and he staggered back with a cry. *That Ébroïne? That hideous deformity?* It was not possible! Yet there was the mother smiling and nodding, and the girl herself looking at him as though she knew him. Then, as he gazed at her altered face, a light broke in on the Saint. So this was God's answer to his prayer. It was His mercy, which blinded him to Ébroïne's beauty, so that her fair face seemed to him repulsive and horrible, and heaving a

great sigh of relief, he broke out in praises and thanksgivings to his Maker, and went off once more into the night.

Poor Géraud, his short life was one battle with the powers of darkness. The peasants, for whom he had given his life, neither understood nor appreciated him. The very monks, with whom he had peopled his monastery, turned against him, finding it impossible to live up to his standard. "A true monk," he would say, "should be an angel!" and these young men were, from all accounts, very far from that ideal. It must have been a bitter disappointment, after all the care he had taken with their training and education. But he won them over in the end. There is a beautiful description of his death written by the Bishop of Cluny. Feeling his strength failing, he called his people together. "Very dear friends," said he, "the day draws near, when my soul will return to its Maker, and this fragile covering crumble to dust." Then it was that this lonely young man, who, had he lived ten centuries later, might have revolutionized France, discovered what a hold he had on the affections of the people. From every quarter they came crowding, priests, monks, nobles and peasants, weeping and mourning the loss which was about to fall upon them. And in the midst of all the affliction, Géraud lay smiling and joyful, "knowing that those who put their trust in God, will see rising before them in the evening of life, the glorious sun of eternity." It was Friday, the 13th of October, when the dawn began to break. All night the Saint, in spite of his weariness, had been listening to the prayers of his chaplain, trying to sing the psalms in his feeble voice. Then, just as the first ray of sunshine fell on his white face and still golden hair, he closed his

eyes, murmuring, "Oh, Saints of God, come to my help." Someone ran hastily, calling to the bishop, and they laid the Saint on a hair cloth, while a monk recited the prayers for the dying, and a priest fetched the Eucharist. When it came they thought him dead, he lay so still and white. "But," as Odon says, "at the approach of the God Saviour, they saw his eyes open, and a smile of recognition light up his face, as he waited for the Heavenly Visitor. And no sooner had he received the body of the Lord Jesus, than his blessed soul took flight to that heaven from which it had come."

I wish I could give you some idea of this beautiful soul, this tenth-century knight of the Christian Church. But no one can realize what Géraud did for Cantal, unless he goes to Aurillac, and studies his life among the scenes where it was lived. And that is what I hope I may incite some of my readers to do, and then perhaps, tell me whether, since the time of Géraud's Master, there has ever been a more angelic character than this Sir Galahad of Cantal.

While I was still meditating, my husband entered and carried me off for a walk by the river. The sun was setting, and the rippled surface of the water glittered like gold. I told him how I had read that ages ago, the robber Celts, who dwelt in the mountains, where the Jordanne takes its rise, had come back from an expedition to the Romanized plain, bringing with them great treasure of golden vessels, which they melted into ingots, in order to carry them more easily. And how, just as they reached the town of Mandailles, they were overtaken, and only had time to pitch the treasure down the gulf into the river bed. In the fight which followed, every brigand was killed, and the gold remained in the bed of the stream.

And ever since, the waves of the Jordanne have brought down flakes of gold, which flicker and dance in the sun like the fairies, who must originally have invented the story !

While I was talking, an old man had come up, and, seating himself on the wall, listened to what I was saying. I had spoken in French, in Aurillac it makes one less conspicuous. As I ended, he spat contemptuously into the water, and shook his head, "Nonsense, Madame, nonsense !" he exclaimed. "Monsieur is no child to believe such tales. Everyone in Aurillac knows the origin of the gold of the Jordanne."

We had heard this story of the much-maligned scientist Gerbert, but, unwilling to disappoint our new friend, professed ignorance, and, seating ourselves on the wall beside him, my husband offered him one of his few remaining and carefully cherished Turkish cigarettes. The old man smoked and smoked and smoked, till I thought he was never going to begin ; but I dared not disturb him for fear of losing the tale altogether, and there we were, perched in a row like three sparrows, gazing down into the fiery water. At last he threw away the cigarette end, offered us each a pinch of snuff, took one himself, and blowing his nose in a thorough and satisfactory manner, began: "I suppose you've heard of Gerbert, him they've put a statue to over in the Gravier," with a side nod.

"The wizard?" I inquired innocently.

"Aye," said he, "the wizard Gerbert, or the shepherd lad of Belliac, or His Holiness Pope Sylvestre II. Whatever you like to call him, it's all the same to me. Well, it was while he was up at the monastery there, that this thing happened which I'm going to tell you. He was

still a young man, but he knew more than any of the monks, more than God Almighty ever meant a man to know in those days, for he had been on the Spanish Road, and gathered all kinds of learning from the black heathen he met there. What price he had to pay for this knowledge, God knows, but the old monks, who had watched him when he was nothing but a shepherd boy, shook their heads, when they found how he knew the songs of the birds, and understood unknown signs, and reckoned by strange mysterious figures which they had never seen. But it was the Abbot, who had found him, a child, trying to count the stars, and had brought him to the monastery and taught him to read and write, who was most troubled. He and Gerbert argued together till both of them lost their temper, and then they fell arguing again."

"I suppose both were Auvergnats?" I asked demurely.

"Assuredly," said the old man, then, as he looked up and caught my eye, he added, with a sly smile: "Ah, it is easy to see Madame knows the Auvergnat!"

"I have heard that there are more lawyers in Auvergne than any other part of France," I said.

"Ah, well, we are as the Good God made us. But wait till you go to Mauriac! We Aurillacois settle our differences between ourselves, as brothers should. But at Mauriac, *Ma foi!* a word leads to a blow, a blow to an avocat, and an avocat to God knows where!"

This remark seemed to lead to so much silent reflection, and he shook his head and took such an abnormal amount of snuff, that at last I had to break in on his reverie.

"And Gerbert?" I inquired.

"Ah," said he, waking up. "Gerbert, yes, I had for-

gotten. The dispute, look you, was as to how much a man ought to know. It is a difficult matter. The Abbot was old-fashioned. 'What is all this learning?' said he, 'where does it lead? To heaven? On the contrary, my son, since we are told that the Tree of Knowledge was not intended for man.'

"At last, one afternoon, Gerbert proposed a walk to Belliac, the village where he was born. There, in the Maison du Pape, as it is still called, the dispute was renewed, hotter than ever, Gerbert protesting that the fields of knowledge were open to all.

"'My Father,' said he, 'will you believe if I turn the waters of the Jordanne into gold?'

"The Abbot smiled. 'Oh, yes,' he said, 'I will believe then.'

"Thereupon Gerbert cut himself a forked branch of hazel, and, after tracing many signs and figures, struck the water, muttering meanwhile words, which he had no doubt learned from a magical book he had, called 'Abacus.' As the stick fell, it seemed to flame, and the waves changed to gold, so that, between the banks, there rolled a heavy molten stream of metal, that seemed to have just escaped from a furnace. Ah, I wish I had been there! I should not have been afraid like the Abbot. Not I! What did he do but make the sign of the Cross, and back it went to water. Bah!"

"It is all gold to-night," said I.

"Aye," he replied, "they say the mass of gold still lies in the bed of the stream at Belliac, but that, of course, is only a fable. Do you suppose we Auvergnats would have left it there all these years?"

We sat for some time watching the stream, as it changed from gold to copper, from copper to blood-red, and finally

we rose and went over to look at the statue of Gerbert, which stands at the end of the Place Deschaux. There we found the great wizard represented in his papal robes and triple crown, figuring as Pope Sylvestre II., and on the pedestal below, four bronze plaques, on which are depicted scenes from the life of this scientific "Saint." There is the shepherd boy of Belliac, kneeling among his sheep, a forked hazel branch in his hand, gazing up at the stars; and behind him are gathered the monks from the Convent of Saint-Géraud. Later, we find him among his crucibles and retorts, an alchemist, an astrologer, one of the great pioneers of science. For we are told, how, instead of praying and giving himself up to the consolations of religion, this curious monk would be found, watching the sleeping plants, listening in springtime to the sap rising from the bosom of the earth, gathering the dews of morning, concocting strange philtres and drugs. From studying the winds and streams, he fashioned an organ, through which the air was forced, by means of a current of water; and by juggling with springs and wheels, he made a clock which called out the hours of its own accord.

No wonder they distrusted him! Yet, in spite of all this, he became Pope. He was not a favourite; clever people seldom are! His less enlightened brethren said that he had sold himself to the Devil, who would surely claim him on the day he said mass at Jerusalem.

For a time all went well, Gerbert avoiding a journey to the Holy Land as he would the pest! One day, however, as he was celebrating Mass in a strange church, he was seized with faintness. "What is the name of this church?" he gasped, in sudden fear. "Your Holiness, it is the church of Jerusalem," said

the priest, who was bending over him, and Gerbert knew that he was lost.

They buried him in a black stone coffin, beneath the porch of Saint John Lateran. There, even in death, he made himself felt. Whenever a Pope was about to die, the black coffin slid became covered with sweat, just as Gerbert's face had done, when he knew his end was approaching. Finally, one Pope, hearing that the fatal stone showed signs of moisture, ordered the coffin to be opened, and the body to be destroyed. They found Gerbert lying in his shroud, fresh and rosy as a vampire, his eyes open, his lips parted. For a moment he seemed about to rise, then a cloud of sulphurous smoke issued from the tomb, driving back the would-be body snatchers, and when they looked again, the coffin was empty, save for a little dust, which was all that was left of the famous monk of Aurillac.

On the way back to the hotel, we visited the church of Notre Dame aux Neiges. It was almost too dark to see the little black face of Our Lady, surmounted by its golden helmet. But we sat some time in the gathering dusk, thinking of the hero Guy de Veyre, and how he saved the town of Aurillac, from the Huguenots that August night, 1581. Already the enemy had gained the ramparts, and were fighting their way down through a house, built against the wall, Guy and his brothers resisting them, step by step. But they were not strong enough to keep back the human flood which poured in from above. "Fire the house," shouted the hero to his townsmen below, and next moment the smoke was rising thick and fast. In vain his friends called upon Guy to retreat. The wild sounds of fighting continued, the cries, the blows. Then when the flames had caught the old wooden roof, and were lighting

up the street, the crowd, which had gathered, beheld high up on the Tour de Seyrac, the form of a woman with a child clasped in her arms. There was a sudden hush. Then cries broke forth. "Gloire à la Libératrice d'Aurillac!" Guy heard it, saw the wondrous light which streamed from the black face beneath the golden helmet. The Huguenots heard it, and gave a howl of terror and despair. Then the roof fell in, the vision faded. . . . When they found him among the ashes, they knew him by a ring given him only a few days before, by his fiancée Mademoiselle de Cayrols. And on the spot, just beneath the Tower of Seyrac where he lay, the people of Aurillac erected a chapel, and above, on the wall, planted a cross, and every year, on the 5th August, a procession was held in memory of Guy de Veyre, and in honour of Notre Dame la Protectrice d'Aurillac. In the Hôtel de Ville hangs the portrait of the hero, and above it the trumpet with which the enemy had sounded the premature call of "Ville Gagnée," and so aroused the town.

As for La Chapelle d'Aureinques, as the memorial building was called, even the Revolution had the decency to spare that, and it still remains one of the most revered spots in Aurillac.

It will already have been seen, that the town by the Jordanne is by no means the uninteresting place I, at first, thought it to be. Indeed, by the time I sat down to my late dinner, my head was giddy with stories; some gruesome enough, like that of Anne Moles, who stole the head of her murdered husband from the spike above the Porte Saint Marcel, where it had been exposed by the Huguenot executioner. As I glanced out at the darkening quay, I could fancy her hurrying home with her prize, through the

gloom, to the black hung oratory she and her children had prepared for it. There, we are told, they prayed and wept before the ghastly relic, till at last they were forced to bury it.

And there are all those naughty stories told about Marie de Senectaire and her nuns, who held such "high jinks" in the Convent de Buis, scandalizing the worthy townspeople with their gay doings. What fun they had, with their masques and their concerts! Marie herself played the guitar and sang charming love songs, and even used to go to see the performances of those shocking Enfants Sans-Souci, when they came from Paris. Indeed, I am afraid the doings of this Abbess of Buis, and those of her friends the Monks of the neighbouring monastery, would have made poor Saint Géraud turn in his grave, could he have known of them! But they were caught at last! Someone reported the all too fascinating Marie to le Bailli Royal, and a commission was called to inquire into her conduct. I am afraid she had a bad time of it! In her wardrobe they found gay silks and satins, and dresses with transparent sleeves, and other atrocities ill becoming a grave and reverend Abbess! Ah, well, it was all part of the pleasure-loving character of Aurillac! No doubt these monks and nuns danced the Bourrée, and even perhaps the Goignade, which so shocked the sober-minded Fléchier of later days, who described it as an imitation of the dances of the Bacchantes.

Everyone dances the Bourrée at Aurillac. You have only to look in at one of the little cafés, which line the quay, to witness it. Sometimes they will dance to a concertina, sometimes to a fiddle, occasionally two or three women will sing the tune, as they sit watching. But the proper instrument, as in all Celtic lands, is the Musette, the small

bagpipe, whose shrill notes seem to rouse the dancers as no other sounds can do.

The Bourrée is essentially one of those survivals which we find among primitive people, such as the Celts of Cantal. All true dances are, of course, symbolical, since dancing was originally a religious act. But the Bourrée is particularly suggestive and charming. As you watch it, you see before you, all the romance of an Auvergnat courtship. The man, his stick hanging to his wrist, dances proudly and boldly, now and then uttering a cry and holding out his arms. The girl avoids him, runs from him, then again approaches, and tries to tempt him by all sorts of coquettish wiles. But the dance must be seen to be appreciated. The Bourrée of the town, too, is scarcely the real thing. You should go to some village fête, or to one of those winter evenings, described by Vermeuouse, when the women sit spinning in the firelight, and the men talk about their cattle and their land. Perhaps you know the scene—the vast, oak-panelled kitchen, with its heavy beams, and, ranged along the wall, the high cupboard beds, with their bright quilts and little curtains, reminding us of Brittany: the polished chestnut cupboards and glittering locks, the great cavernous chimney and raised hearth, the red glow of the copper, the dancing of the flames. On one side the fire, with his wife opposite him, sits the head of the family. Perhaps it is the old grandfather himself, or it may be *l'ainàt* (as the eldest son is called in the patois), *l'ainàt*, who has remained at home on the land, keeping open house for his brothers, providing *dots* for his sisters. We recognize him at once with his :

“Collier de barbe, épais et dur

Le vent et le soleil, la pluie et le grand air



THE BOURRÉE

L'avait rendu sec et noiraud, comme un grillon :
 La paume de ses mains était rude et gercée,
 Mais le bleu de son œil, comme un matin de juin,
 Était demeuré jeune, et clair, et lumineux."

(Vermenouze.)

And there you will see the Bourrée danced as it used to be danced at Carlat, by Queen Margot and her lover d'Aubiac, to the sound of a musette, played as only an Auvergnat and a Scotchman can play it. You will hear stories, too, such as you will hear nowhere else, and if you had been there a year or two ago, you might have met the master singer, Arsène Vermenouze, himself, without whose help it is impossible to become acquainted with the real life of Auvergne.

For myself, I found all that is now left of the poet, in a dark bookshop in the Rue Lacoste. They lie before me as I write, the simple volumes, and I touch them lovingly, for to me they represent Auvergne. There is the great thick book, loosely bound in white paper, and on the cover the name: "Jous la Cluchado" which is Auvergnat for "Beneath the Thatch." "A collection of patois verses," said a learned Frenchman condescendingly, when I spoke of them. Say, rather, a translation of the whole mystery of the charm of Auvergne! So before we leave Aurillac, where he lived and wrote, let me introduce you to Arsène Vermenouze.

I was to have met him this spring, but Death forestalled me; and I can only picture him as he has been drawn by others, lean, bony, sunburned, with bright gentle eyes, and the bold features of the men of Cantal. As to his verse, the land where he was born is the beginning and end of his song. He fell in love with her in early youth, worshipped her whole-heartedly, and remained faithful to the end. As

Jean Ajalbert says: "Tous ses vers sont toujours pour ses premières amours." Hence both his strength and weakness. Only those who love the beauty of simplicity can appreciate Vermenouze. His method is his own. He wastes no time over extraneous matters, which others can handle better than he, but goes straight to work at a picture, which he paints as no one else has ever done or ever will do. For he has chosen a subject familiar to him from childhood; the daily life, the joys, the sorrows, hopes and cares of the peasants of Auvergne. Hence he works upon the foundation of all beauty, unerring truthfulness. His kitchens are fragrant with the fresh bread which is being baked in the oven. At church, he feels the prayers welling up in his heart, as he sits in the old pew, where his fathers have sat before him. He tells of the washing-day down by the river, of his mother in all the splendour of her Sunday costume, of the ploughing and the sowing, of the slow-pacing oxen, "their eyes still full of the visions of the night." In short, he makes one acquainted with all the joy and beauty of this simple patriarchal existence. If one does not care for such a life, one will not appreciate Vermenouze, for he has no other songs to offer us, though, beneath the simplicity, we shall often catch glimpses of profound meaning. There is a little poem, in "Mon Auvergne," which occurs to me in connection with this distinctive quality. It is called "En Famille." Beside the hearth, sits the poet, watching his sister and niece mending and patching old clothes, for the home was a humble one.

"Ce soir là, je couvais d'un cerveau paternel,
Des vers que je sentais palpiter, près d'éclore,
Et qui me semblaient beaux, n'étant pas nés encore. . . ."

And as he sits thinking about his new song, the sight

of the two women at their work strikes him as low and sordid :

“ Oh ! comme ce travail me semblait puéril ! ”

It is a cold night, and presently to the door comes a beggar :

“ Le spectre frissonnant de la Misère en deuil. ”

In a moment the niece has led the old man to the fire, given him a bowl of soup, and, while he eats it, has climbed the ladder four steps at a time, and from the attic fetched a warm pair of stockings, which she puts on the old frozen feet. Presently, when the beggar is dozing, and the women are mending his coat, Vermenouze turns once more to his verse-making. But, alas ! its charm has departed. How poor does any poem seem before the living poem of his niece, with her knitting and her patching. And as he watches her kneeling at the feet of the old man, putting on the stockings she has made, he feels his intellectual pride sink away like a wave, and his verses seem cold and lifeless as a rusty sword hilt.

It is of such homely scenes that Vermenouze sings. There is “ La Quête,” one of the most beautiful poems, showing the charity which exists among these people one for another ; and “ Solitude,” an exquisite picture of the old home with its hospitable roof, “ beloved of swallows,” and the broad eaves, “ suitable for the building of nests.” And though there are no love songs of his own (for Vermenouze remained faithful to his dear land), yet he can sing them for his young countrymen :—

“ Les cheveux de ma mie
Sont d’or luisant et pur,

Plus blonds que le seigle,
Que n'est le froment mûr ;
C'est d'or, comme son cœur,
Que sont ses fins cheveux.
Songeant à son œil bleu,
Je ne songe à rien plus.

Du nom de mon aimée
Ma bouche est parfumée
Comme une fleur d'avril,
Et garde un goût de miel,
Rien que d'avoir nommé
Ma mie et mon aimée ;
Quand elle est avec moi
Je me crois dans le ciel."

In his hunting songs Vermenouze excels, for he was a very Nimrod, this poet of Auvergne. There is a picture of him given by, I think, Ajalbert. For weeks he would be full of business (he was a distiller, and had a shop at Aurillac), when one autumn evening, the nomad, which was in him, would awake. Taking down a gun, he would whistle to one of his dogs, and disappear. For days nothing would be heard of him. Then, as suddenly as he had gone, he would return, a feather in his cap, his bag heavy with game. And while his old servant took out the partridges, he would seat himself before his desk, and write down the verses he had composed while wandering among the mountains. For, as he himself says, "Even if I do not always bring back hares, partridges, grouse, I can at least find plenty of verses. I pluck them by handfuls and dozens . . . I study the rocks, listen to the song of jays, and little larks, till the great Book of the Good God, with its pages of woods, meadows, rivers and skies opens wide before me."

And, indeed, it is a very faithful translation of this Book of the Good God which Vermenouze has given us. The work having been a labour of love, has resulted in a thing of beauty.

Yet the fame of Vermenouze has not spread far beyond his native country, and this partly because his best songs are sung in his mother tongue, the old Latin patois, with its curious mingling of Celtic and Germanic words, which is the true speech of Auvergne. The poet found the poor old language in a deplorable condition, without a literature, or any fixed rules of spelling. But for Vermenouze it was the one language in the world: "To love one's language is to love one's old Mother, one's clock tower, one's home." So he took the poor despised tongue, and in it wrote his verses. It has, perhaps, hampered him as to subject, for the vocabulary is very scanty, limited to the needs of a simple pastoral race. There are, for instance, no words for "painter," "musician," "poet," "philosopher," though there are plenty to describe the life and surroundings of the peasant. But it is partly because of these very limitations, that Vermenouze has so admirably caught the spirit of Auvergne. His poems have the same grand simplicity, which characterizes those of Burns and Allan Ramsay. There is no straining after effect; he paints what he sees and knows, with the only colours he has at hand. He sings as the birds sing, or as David sang, while yet he kept the sheep of his father Jesse. And because his song is a true song, taught by nature herself, the song we all love best at heart, I believe the simple poems of Vermenouze will live when many grander and more artificial works will have been forgotten.

CINDERELLA

"La vôle, la Marianno ;
La vôle, mais l'aurai !"

"One morning fair I took my love
To a fountain cool, mid the forest gloom,
Where purple thyme and genesta flowers
Breathe through the air their sweet perfume.

Forth from the rock, the water springs,
Scattering itself o'er the golden sand,
Only the nightingale comes at eve,
To drink alone in this forest land.

And there, I bathed your hair, my love !
I bathed your hair and your little feet,
Your pretty hands and your rosy face,
I washed your fair face, oh my sweet !

And when I saw you on the hill,
I took your curls for the sunbeams gay,
And your lips, beloved, made me think
Of strawberries, so ripe they lay !

I gathered flowers of every hue,
Not garden flowers, but fresh and wild,
And in a garland wove my flowers,
And caught you weeping, as you smiled.

Weeping for joy—is it not true ?
To see yourself so fair, my own !
The rose of love on your peach bloom cheek,
Your dear heart beating for me alone.

And now, with ribboned cap all white,
Your two little sabots, neat and small,
And the four thick coils of your golden chain,
Which o'er your flower-trimmed bodice fall,

You are no more a shepherdess !
And the folks will smile as we wander free,
Saying : ' Look how he takes his bride on his arm,
How fair she is, how tender he ! '

For the fount, in which your face I lave,
Is the fairy fountain of purity,
The fountain of poetry and truth,
Of youth and immortality."

ARSÈNE VERMENOUE

CHAPTER XII

Vic-sur-Cère—Naucelles—Cologne—Marmagnac—The Castle of Tournemine—Saint-Cernin—Salers—A Mountain Dairy Farm

THERE is a certain road, leading north from Aurillac, which has always excited my imagination. On the Carte Taride, it looks like a wriggling red worm, and my experience told me that a road so indicated, was sure to be more interesting than the straight switchbacks so beloved of motorists. When I suggested this route, my husband demurred, as I knew he would.

"But what about Vic?" he objected. "Do you mean to say that you are going to leave the valley of the Cère, one of the most picturesque drives in Auvergne, for a road of which you know nothing, except that, as far as I can see, it turns and twists round breakneck hills, like a dilapidated corkscrew?"

This was certainly a difficulty. I did want to see Vic, the little town, celebrated, even in Roman times, for its medicinal waters. It was to Vic that Queen Margot came for a change of air, during her stay at Carlat: the quiet townspeople have scarcely yet forgotten the fêtes organized in her honour by the Governor, Monsieur de Lignerac. Here it was she learned to dance the Bourrée, and was so charmed with it, that, later, she introduced it at Court.

Just outside Vic, too, are the ruins of the Castle of Muret, where the wicked Baron of Tournemine cut off the

hand of a certain officer named Loup, who had offended him. "No wolf enters my castle, without leaving his paw behind!" said he, with a grim jest on the soldier's name.

And there is a fine church at Vic, an ancient church, sculptured with those monstrosities, so dear to the Auvergnat of the twelfth century! No doubt it was here the Queen of Navarre, and the other heroes and heroines of the neighbourhood, went on Sundays to confess their sins, so that they might begin again with a clear slate on Monday morning.

Not far off is the Castle of Croprières, where once lived, and, as the country people will tell you, still lingers Marie Angélique de Scorailles de Roussille, Duchesse de Fontanges, the beautiful black-eyed mistress of Louis XIV. It is said that, on stormy nights, she still holds her mad revels in the castle, and has been recognized by the well-known head dress, named after her, "La Fontanges."

All that valley of the Cère is wonderful, and the road as it climbs upward, affords exquisite glimpses of the Plomb de Cantal.

But I had made up my mind to investigate that queer twisting worm of a road. Besides, I wanted to see Mauriac. And I had my way, as, according to my husband, I usually have! And what a way it proved!

There was Naucelles, with its little church, dedicated to Saint Christopher, containing an ancient chapel to the Virgin. Connected with this chapel, I have read a beautiful story. It appears that at Naucelles lived an orphan girl called Mongette. As she was delicate the old priest adopted her, and it was her duty to keep the chapel sweet and clean, and the altar of the Virgin adorned with fresh flowers. It was at the time when the English were

ravaging Auvergne, and it so happened that a handsome officer and his men were despatched from Aurillac, to protect little Naucelles. The expected enemy, however, not arriving, presently the soldiers returned to the city, and then it was that Mongette discovered that she could not forget the young man. His handsome face, as she had seen it in church, haunted her, even coming between her and her prayers. For a time, she struggled with herself, till at last, finding resistance useless, she made up her mind to follow her lover. The night before she left, she brought the keys of the chapel, and laid them at the feet of the statue. "I am not worthy!" she said, "I am not worthy! Take them, and find someone purer to serve at Thine altar."

Two months followed, months of delirious happiness, spent with her lover in Aurillac. Then came the end. The young officer fell in a skirmish, and Mongette, left desolate, knew not where to hide her shame. At last, starving, she wandered back to Naucelles.

"Do you remember a girl called Mongette, who once lived here?" she asked the sexton, who was digging a grave.

"Why, surely!" said the old man, "My memory is not so bad as that. Mongette? She passed me just now on her way to chapel. A holy maid is Mongette, a saint if ever there was one. It was a blessed day for Naucelles, when Monsieur le Curé took her for his daughter."

For a moment, Mongette stood staring at the old man. Then thinking he had lost his reason, she turned away. The church door stood open, and with a strange feeling of hope she ventured in, and made her way toward the Chapel of the Virgin. There lay the keys, just as she had

left them months ago, while kneeling before the altar was a curiously familiar form. Mongette felt her knees tremble beneath her, as she noticed the well-remembered gown and the pattern of the lace on the cap. At last the figure rose and faced her. "Who are you?" stammered the girl, gazing at the sweet grave countenance, so like, yet so unlike her own.

"I am She, whom once you served;" came the answer, "She to whom you gave the keys; She, whom you have never forgotten altogether, even in your sin. Come back to me, my daughter! You need not fear. No one knows that you have been away, for I myself have taken your place. Will you not come back and serve me as of old?"

Then Mongette fell at those blessed feet, and hid her face for shame. And over her she felt the waving of hands, and heard around her the rustle of unseen wings, and the air was filled with music and perfume, as though it were the Festival of the Assumption. When, at last, she ventured to raise her eyes, the figure was gone, and she was alone with the old statue of the Virgin of Naucelles gazing down upon her.

Not far from Naucelles is the village of Cologne, the scene of a horrible tragedy in connection with the Wars of Religion. It is the 11th of September, and on the terrace of the old castle, whose square donjon may still be seen, twelve Huguenots have been brought out to die. They shew no fear, only ask that they may be allowed to pray together for the last time. So they kneel, and their voices rise and fall, in one of the old canticles still used by the French Protestants. At last there is silence. "Fire!" and with the word nine of the prisoners are free for ever. But the unfortunates, who are left, are wild with

terror. Springing up, wounded as they are, they fling themselves over the battlements. Two land on the rock, and move no more, but the third is seen running, running toward the river. Now he takes to the stream, struggles for a while, till at last his strength giving out, he is whirled down by the current and disappears. But one comes across so many stories of the kind on this road, that they seem scarcely worth mentioning.

At Jussac, a pretty little old-fashioned village, we turned aside into a charming valley, to search for the remains of an old Merovingian fortress, about which I had heard a story connected with a fair *châtelaine* of the romantic name of Delphine. To the right, rose cliffs covered with verdure, and beside us, on the left, murmured a brown trout stream called, I think, the Authre. By and by we reached the village of Marmagnac, near which the Castle was supposed to be. But, alas, all traces of it had vanished, and even the fair Delphine de Caissac herself was forgotten. But I am glad I have seen the valley; it is a place to dream about, and picture the Lady of Roquenaton waking up to find her husband lying dead at her side, and his enemy glaring down at her, in the moonlight.

The great road, when we regained it after this detour, was even more surprising than it looked on the map. It turned and doubled like a hunted hare, and must have puzzled our poor automobile considerably. One moment she found herself running northward, as she knew she ought to be. Then, just as visions of the Mauriac garage began to fill her poor expectant little bonnet, she was swung round a hairpin turn, and found herself going in a precisely reverse direction, looking down to where, 50 feet below, lay the road she had just traversed. Again and

again the same thing happened. And it was all so meaningless, so unnecessary: the turns could have been so much less abrupt, the way so easily shortened, that I wonder the magneto didn't short circuit, or the petrol run out, or one of those many things happen, by which an automobile shows when she is out of temper! Yet how beautiful was the way! For myself, I would not have shortened it by an inch. Those turns, which many a poor horse must have found so wearisome, gave unending change and variety to the view. Now we pass through a little town, where a couple of oxen are being shod. I used to wonder what the great wooden cages, with their chains and pulleys, were intended for. There is one in each village. In it the ox is placed, his head tied to one end. He is then slung up from the ground by means of broad straps, the hoof is fixed comfortably, and the shoe nailed on. At first I carefully avoided the sight, it seemed so cruel. But I really do not think it is; only an ox, like a camel, has a natural objection to anything out of the ordinary way. I have never heard a sound uttered during the process, and when one comes to realize the adoration of the Auvergnat for his cattle, one ceases to fear for them. These people of Cantal hate parting with their money, and it is not at all uncommon for a farmer to put off sending for a doctor, for himself or one of his family, till it is too late. But directly a cow or an ox is in the least indisposed, he calls in the best assistance, quite regardless of expense!

All along the road, we kept meeting hay waggons, drawn by slow heavy cream-coloured beasts, their faces hidden by long veils of knotted cords, to keep off the flies; their only harness, the rope by which their great lyre-shaped horns are lashed to the yoke. They take the

middle of the road, and directly the car sounds her warning note, the driver, who walks at their head, lays his stick on the bar of wood in the direction he wants them to move, and the huge beasts slouch clumsily aside and make way for us to pass.

Look at that great donjon keep over there on the other side of the valley! It is Château d'Anjony, Froissart's Castle of Tournemine. They say there were five such here originally, belonging to five brothers, who, like true Auvergnats, were always quarrelling among themselves. This particular fortress is the only one which remains, and a wonderful place it is, reminding one, in its general form, of the Tower of London, with a great turret at each corner, and within, dark ancient chambers furnished with rare tapestry, and old portraits of forgotten tyrants, who levied blackmail on travellers in olden days. It is worth a visit, if only as being the scene of almost the last act in the life of our old friend Amerigot Marché, of whom we have heard so much in this book. It was down this very road, "Le Roi des Pillards," as he was called, came riding one evening in 1390, attended only by a page. He was broken and ruined, and finding himself homeless, came in his tribulation to beg shelter of his cousin german Jean de Tournemine. As we photographed the fortress, we pictured the robber chief's surprise and rage, when he found himself trapped. He had already pulled off his sword, and cleaned himself, says Froissart, when he asked: "Where is my cousin Tournemine?"

"He is in his chamber," replied the varlet. "Come and see him."

"With all my heart!" cried Amerigot, heartily, "it is a long time since we met."

So he laid aside his coat of mail, donned another suit,



A VILLAGE OX CART

and followed the servant to his cousin's room. But, arrived there, he soon found out his mistake. Jean well knew that his kinsman's day was over, and had no mind to offend the king, or give his enemy shelter. So he cried roughly, "How is this, Amerigot; who has sent for you? I arrest you as my prisoner. You are a wicked traitor; you have broken the truce and shall suffer for it." It was a mean trick to play, and in spite of Amerigot's many crimes, one cannot but be sorry for the old lion, betrayed at last in such a miserable and unworthy fashion.

"Why, Tournemine," he cried, "I am your cousin. Are you doing this to try me?" But he might as well have spoken to the walls. Quickly he was seized, fettered and thrown into one of the dungeons, which still lie at the base of those high towers. And when the Duke of Berri heard of it, which he did as soon as a horseman could gallop his way to Paris, he sent word to the Seneschal of Auvergne to deliver Amerigot into his hands. And so he was taken northward to Paris, probably by this very road we are travelling. I don't suppose he felt very cheerful as he rode along, for well he knew what his end would be. I daresay he wished the road was even longer than it is! Perhaps he and his guards stopped at Saint-Cernin, this little town with its magnificent wood-carving. Shall we too enter the church and look at it?

Though the morning is fine, the oak is so black, we have much ado in photographing the exquisite lace-like detail of the Jesse Tree. A nice-looking woman is dusting, and shows us a curious double picture, representing Saint Roch with Saint Léobard, the old anchorite we found at Marmoutier. It seems he is quite a hero at Saint-Cernin, possessing a legend all his own. Just outside the village there is a little spring, where he had his hut

He was a very holy hermit, and spent so long over his prayers, that he had no time to work for a living. So every day he went round with a begging bowl. At last, the women, who were a thrifty race, and, like most thrifty people, inclined to be intolerant, put their heads together. "Why should we feed this lazy fellow?" said they, and next day, when the Saint appeared as usual, each woman had ready her saucepan of boiling water, which she flung in his face! This was too warm a reception for Léobard, and he lost his temper! Like many of the primitive saints, he had preserved some of the characteristics of that particular nature god he had supplanted. So he had no difficulty in avenging himself. For forty days and nights it rained mud over the valley, till the Doire rushed swollen and yellow through the ruined cornfields, and the people of Saint-Cernin began to fear that their very village would be washed away. Then, at their prayers, the Saint relented, the deluge ceased, the sun shone out, and the river retired once more into its wonted channel!

I think it was just outside the village of Saint-Martin that a tyre burst! A priest was passing at that moment, and fell back as though shot. "What was that?" he cried, as we stopped. "What was that?" In spite of our vexation, we could not help smiling at his fear. "Oh, it was only a tyre!" said my husband, bitterly, as he began unstrapping the Stepney. "Mon Dieu!" cried the priest, then in a tone of relief, "I thought it was a cannon!" The sound had brought quite a little crowd around us, who looked on with intense interest, as the Stepney was fitted, one old man remarking to another: "Il faut être au courant, pour se faire chaffeur!" I noticed two little boys who were puzzling over the number plate.

"Qu'est-ce-que c'est?" asked one. "653 F?"

"Oui," answered the other, "mais c'est une jolie automobile. Si elle a coûté 653 francs, ce n'est pas trop cher, mon pauvre Jacques!"

By the time the car was once more on her feet, we found ourselves the centre of such enthusiastic interest, that it was necessary to abandon the idea we had formed of lunching at Saint-Martin, and hurry on to Salers. The little crowd gave a shout as they saw us start, and even Monsieur le Curé, who had regained his composure, and had been watching as eagerly as the rest, waved his broad felt hat, and wished us "bon voyage." As the horn sounded, I heard the boy mutter, with the air of a connoisseur, as he clutched Jacques by the arm, "Non, assurément, ce n'est pas trop cher! Elle est superbe! Superbe!"

One boy had climbed up on the luggage carrier, and seated himself on my suit case. As the car sprang quickly off, there was a cry. "Géraud! Géraud!" screamed a chorus of little girls, and next moment there was a bump, and, looking back, I saw a motherly little person, with a figure like a bolster, and an apron big enough for her grandmother, smacking the unlucky Géraud, as he sprawled in the dust, and calling out the Auvergnat equivalent for: "She'd tell his mother, see if she didn't! And wouldn't he get what for, when his father saw how he had torn his trousers!"

I don't think there can be any place more beautiful than Salers, or one more altogether suggestive! Let me try and picture the scene, as I saw it that summer day.

Our road, after a final twist, had settled down to business, and, after a run of some miles, had entered an exquisite

valley, broad and undulating, dotted with farms and tiny villages. It is the meeting-place of the three streams—the Maronne, the Aspres and the Malrien, which have wound their way through gorges in the distant hills, to water this rich Canton of Salers. All around the hay is sweet. Once we stop beside a meadow, and I go and bury my face in the dry scented grass, much to the amusement of the farmer and his family.

“Madame would like to stop and help us to turn the hay?” asks a young girl, watching me as she leans on her fork. Then as I rise and go over to look at the magnificent oxen, who are lazily feeding from an enormous heap which has been piled before them, she tells me proudly, how her father owns the handsomest “bétail” in Salers, and, as everyone knows, the cattle of Salers are the finest in the world. I stroke the glistening red coats of the gentle beasts, and look around. And it is then, for the first time, I see Salers as it is.

Like a sentinel it stands on its lofty pedestal of basalt, keeping guard over the valley, as it has done for a thousand years. Grim and black, silhouetted against the sapphire sky. An old warrior in his ancient armour! And it is so bristling with pointed turrets, so protected by battlements and forts, that one hesitates to approach the still formidable gateway by which it is entered. Within, the streets are narrow, steep and winding, and almost every house fortified, as it had need to be when the town was built in the thirteenth century. Here is the church where the lords of Salers came with their households to hear Mass. From that old belfry, the tocsin was sounded, when the English came to besiege Salers. Outside, in the narrow street, I find a little book-shop, and as I look

over the poor collection of postcards, Madame tells me how the Huguenots attacked the town in the sixteenth century, and were routed by the brave Le Bargue. Seeing me interested, she slips her ball of worsted in her apron pocket, and, still knitting, strolls up the street, by my side, to show me the place where the hero fell. He had been wounded in the stomach so horribly, that no one but a Frenchwoman could have described his condition in polite language! But, amid his agony, he still fought on. "En avant, au nom du Seigneur!" cried he, as with one hand spread over his gaping wound, and the other still grasping his sword, he hurled himself down upon the Calvinists. And so the town was saved, and Salers could still boast itself a "Virgin City."

At the top of the street we came to "La Tour de l'Horloge," black and forbidding as when the Republican soldiers passed beneath it on their way to the square, round which are still grouped the principal houses. What fortresses they inhabited in those days! Truly their house was their castle. Yet the solid walls and towers availed little when the days of the Terror came. This old *place*, with its fountain, has seen some terrible sights—mothers sobbing over their dead sons; husbands parted from their wives; children crying for bread, and no one daring to give it for fear of being declared *suspect*. Here was planted the tree of liberty, and these stones ran red with blood, and the wine stolen from the cellars of the aristocrats!

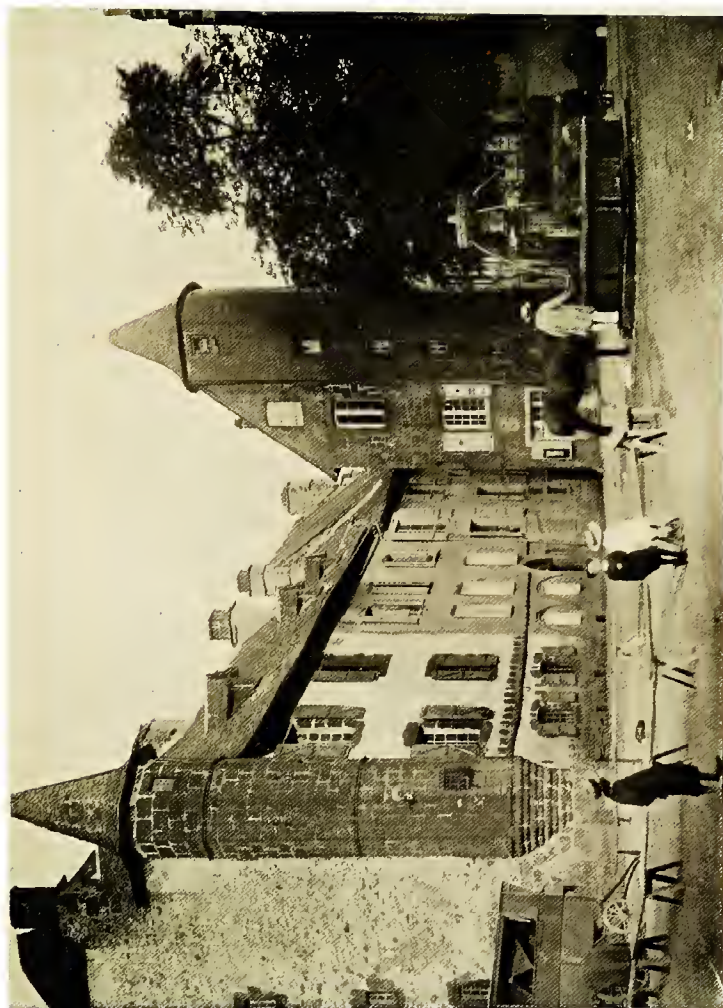
I believe we had lunch at Salers—in fact we must have done—but I forget where, or of what it had consisted. I wandered about the old town in a dream, looking up at the curtainless windows, and the rich mouldings and escutcheons on the doors.

At last I found myself on the Promenade de Barrouze, gazing out over the valley.

“Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made.”

That expresses Salers as we see it to-day.

Above on the high towers, the ivy, like the long hair of some ancient Celt, sways gently in the breeze. Tufted pink valerian is doing its best to fill up the rents in the battlemented walls. Ringdoves are cooing in an ancient lime-tree, possibly planted by Henry of Navarre to celebrate the birth of his son Louis; and a humble bee is forcing his way into the gay snapdragons, which shut their doors against him. Round the fountain which once ran wine, wine often mingled with blood, children are playing; I can hear their voices. And the Curé is walking up and down in the sunshine, reading his breviary. See, he has just noticed me, and taken off his broad beaver hat. How peaceful everything is! How different from the past! “We must grow better as we grow older,” says Browning, and surely the old Sentinel on the hill, resting after his rough and tumble existence, has advanced very far from the days of his fiery youth! His hot passions and fierce struggles are over, together with the warfare, the fighting, and the glory. Dear old fellow, he did his best! His nobles, in their uncouth way, guarded the valley, and protected the peasants from worse foes, though, to be sure, it was much as a slave owner protects his slaves. And the peasants? When they had had enough of it, they rose against the nobles, taking a vengeance all the more terrible, because the centuries of wrong had to be expiated in a few months. And all the time the church was acting as mediator, sometimes with more success,



THE SQUARE AND FOUNTAIN OF SALERS

sometimes with less, and the "sentinel" was learning his lesson.

And now, to-day, though he still wears his armour, it is only because it suits him so well, for he has a touch of vanity, look' you, this old warrior Salers, and loves to hear strangers admire and wonder at him.

But see, Monsieur le Curé has closed his book, and is coming toward me. I must ask him about the Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin, which used to be such a feature in Salers, and of which I have read in Ajalbert.

"Alas, Madame, it is all over," says he, with a smile at my eagerness. "Yes, it is quite true about the King and Queen who used to preside at it. They paid large sums for the honour, and still more money was wasted on the feasting and drinking. It is better for such customs to die. The people of Salers are quarrelsome, it is in the blood, and wine, with them, invariably leads to fighting."

I asked him whether he thought the old custom dated back to prehistoric times, as is certainly the case at Vassivière, and in Berry, where, as is well known, many districts have their "King" and "Queen," who purchase their short-lived royalty at an auction held each year, and are proclaimed by the sound of bagpipes and haut-boys. But I don't think he knew very much about the matter, and merely said that the custom was probably very ancient, and like all ancient things, had need of reform.

He knew much more about the cows, which he referred to as "les Salers" (just as we say "the Jerseys") and accompanied us some way on our road, to show us a "buron" and explain the method of making the cheese.

As in most mountain districts, the valleys of Auvergne are not used for pasturing the cows, but are mown twice

in the season, to provide for the needs of winter, while the cows are taken up among the hills, to the high pastures or "pacages" where are situated the "burons."

It is a charming sight in May to see the herds starting on their summer outing. For days the cows have been refusing their hay. The ray of sunshine, which has found its way into the brown darkness of their winter quarters, has roused all their primitive instincts for freedom. Before them rise visions of delicious fresh grass, the freedom of the hills, the joys of motherhood. As you pass through the villages you can hear them moving restlessly, and lowing in their stalls. At last comes the wished-for morning! The priest arrives and blesses them, the cow-keeper and his assistant, with their dogs, join the cavalcade, and off they go!

You can never realize how charming is the sight until you have witnessed it. It is the only time one ever sees the great lethargic beasts really excited. They move quite quickly, swaying from side to side in their eagerness to reach the well-remembered pasture. Now a cow stops to crop a mouthful of grass by the roadside, just a "hors d'œuvre" to whet her appetite for what is coming. A dog spies her, and comes fussily up to remonstrate at the delay. Out goes a heel, and round comes a horn; but you can see from her very eye that she doesn't mean it. Everything is a joke to-day, and besides after all the dog is right. She would not lose a moment of her summer life for the world!

A broad rolling wind-swept pasture, reminding one somewhat of our downland, only wilder, more angular, and everywhere are cows!

"Is there not a danger of their straying away?" I ask

Monsieur le Curé, who by this time is accustomed to the automobile, and ready to talk on his favourite subject.

"Oh no! Each herd keeps together on its feeding ground. They are so intelligent—these mountain cows. Every one knows her name, and, when called, comes lowing to be milked."

And now, sheltered by a bouquet of pine-trees, we come upon a tiny cottage, its heavy thatch reaching almost to the ground. As I turn from the pretty sight without, I find that Monsieur le Curé and my husband have entered, and follow them.

A low dark cabin, with a rude hearth, beside which is a miserable bed. Other furniture there is absolutely none, save a couple of stools and the various utensils used for cheese-making. There are the pails in which the milk is received, "guerlous" as they are called, and there are the wooden vessels, the "gerles," into which the pails are emptied. The pressing of the curd is done by means of a bar of wood and some heavy stones. Above, on a shelf, are piled the great blocks of finished cheese, the "fourmes." I am afraid I did not study the process very closely, in spite of the priest's minute explanations. I was trying to picture to myself what the life of these men must be like, during the four or five months they spend in the mountains. How lonely, when the grey mists come creeping down the hillside, blotting out the view of the valley, and isolating the "buron" as though it were on a desert island! Yet they probably do not feel it. After all it is a natural life, such as that lived by the first of the new race who came, bringing cows to Cantal. In some such hovel he lived, and some such uncouth tongue he spoke. His food, also, was of

hard black bread, and the trebly-skimmed milk which an English pig would refuse with scorn. He clothed himself in much the same fashion as this "buronnier," who sits stolidly working away at the curd, taking no notice of us after the first sharp glance and grunt of welcome. He sang, no doubt, the same yoddling ditty as I heard the "boutilier" singing when we drove up.

Indeed, if you want to study the ways of the primitive dairy farmer, you can scarcely do better than visit the "burons" of Cantal. You will find plenty to interest you. There are the calves, a never-failing source of delight! When milking time comes round, each little one is brought out from the "védélat" (or nursery, where the calves sleep) and given over to its mother for a few minutes. Then it is taken and tied to her front leg, where she continues to lick it contentedly, while the "vacher" proceeds with his milking.

And there are the great cows themselves, so different from our gentle Alderneys. Sometimes it so happens a wolf finds his way into the pasture. Instantly the cows surround him, heads down, horns forward, in a solid bristling circle. When all are ready, down they close upon him, and in a few moments, all that is left of the enemy is a torn and bloody wolf-skin!

And in the evening, if you understand Auvergnat, there are the stories. For when once he grows accustomed to your presence, the "buronnier" is a great "raconteur," and will hold forth by the hour on the subject of the "drac" and the black goat, and above all, on cases where the cattle have been overlooked by the Evil Eye! No wonder he is a sorcerer! He has to be "instruit" to protect his charges from the wicked wiles of stranger "buronniers" ever on the watch to injure him.

As we were leaving, the first of the herd came up to the door.

"How much does a cow like that cost?" said I to the priest, who, turning to the taciturn kneader of curd, repeated the question: "Con bourez da quila batsa?"

"Tridzi pistolas!" said the man, with eager promptitude.

The priest looked surprised. "He asks too much," said he, "they are avaricious, these mountaineers. But if Madame wants a cow, he will, no doubt, take less."

I hastened to assure the worthy Curé that my question had been dictated merely by curiosity, and we left the men to their milking.

And now we have reached the road once more, and are saying good-bye to the priest. "I feel I have been in another world," said I, "and I owe it all to you, Monsieur."

"Yes," answered the Curé, "it is probably a long journey between your life and that of the 'vacher,' but all the same, Madame, *he* would not change for all you could offer him!"

CHAPTER XIII

Mauriac—The Church—Saint Théodechilde and her Story—The Market at Mauriac

THE afternoon was closing as we came within sight of Mauriac. Above, the pale turquoise sky was full of dove-coloured clouds, among which, looking like a nun in her winding-sheet, floated a sad-faced moon. If my mind had not already been full of Théodechilde, the sight of the "virgin huntress," watching over the city, would have reminded me that we were entering the domain of the royal maiden.

If ever you go to Mauriac try to arrive in the evening. But you will be sure to do so, it lies so far from everywhere. Yet fourteen hundred years ago, when the daughter of Clovis came to take possession of Le Vieux Château, it must have been still more inaccessible, since we are told that the princess spent months on the journey from Paris. But perhaps, if you have not been to Mauriac, you scarcely remember who Théodechilde was? Well, we shall soon renew our acquaintance with her: but not till after dinner, for here we are at the hotel, and here is Madame, stout and comely, waiting at the door to welcome us.

The Ecu de France is a delightful inn, so old itself and so evidently on the site of a far older hostel, that there is no knowing what noted persons may not have slept in the quaint bedchambers in days gone by, when Mauriac was still a great pilgrim resort.

Upstairs, we stumbled along dark passages, which wound

their way round the vast chimney stacks of the rooms below, till presently Madame opened a door, and we found ourselves in a low oak-panelled room. How I wish I were back there now, looking down into the street, where the women are beginning to gather in groups for their evening gossip, and dogs are prowling about searching for stray scraps in the gutters! Opposite, through an open window, I can watch the tailor's wife putting her children to bed, while below in the shop, her husband sits stitching busily. Why is there always such a fascination about looking in at other people's windows? I suppose it is part of the charm of doing what one knows one oughtn't to! Every homely interior becomes the stage of some little romance, unconsciously played for our special delectation.

The *salle-à-manger* is immense, the light of the hanging lamp reaching scarcely further than the edge of the white cloth, so that in the dark panelled corners I can but just make out a gleam of burnished copper and brass. We are evidently late, for the long table is scattered with empty bottles, and serviettes tied in every conceivable knot and twist. Nevertheless, the dinner itself is excellent, and we sit so long over it, that at last when we go out for a saunter round the town, it is almost dark. All down the street people are sitting at their doors, enjoying the warm summer dusk, and from more than one café comes the sound of angry voices, for are we not in "quarrelsome Mauriac"! Presently we find ourselves out on the ramparts, and the moon, grown bright and golden, shows mysterious turretted houses, and dark archways which perhaps lead to one of those monasteries for which Mauriac has always been famous. Then, at last, we reach the church—the beginning and end of the town. There is still a faint

light in the windows, so let us enter and see this church of Théodechilde.

How wonderful is the porch with its sculptured tympanum, and rich mouldings suggesting the folds of heavy curtains. We are reminded, as we enter, of the foundress, for on either side of the magnificent west door stands a lion in black basalt, still guarding this Christian altar of Our Lady of Miracles, as, fourteen hundred years ago, the real lions are said to have guarded the Druid altar of Our Lady in the Forest. Within, all is solemn and mysterious; great Roman columns soaring up into the darkness; and the sanctuary itself, dim and uncertain, lighted only by the *sacred fire*, and the shifting gleam of Théodechilde's candle, which still burns, as it has burned ever since she first lighted it, before the miraculous statue of Notre Dame des Miracles.

There are many women praying in the church. Let us kneel among them, and joining in their litany, try to evoke the spirit of the saintly maiden we have come to visit.

"Saint Théodechilde, daughter of kings, pray for us !

"Saint Théodechilde, follower of a blessed mother, pray for us !

"Saint Théodechilde, founder of monasteries, pray for us !

"Saint Théodechilde, builder of the Church of Mauriac, pray for us !

"Saint Théodechilde, liberator for captives, pray for us !

"Saint Théodechilde, shining lamp in the House of God, pray for us !"

The voices of the women still murmur on, but I have lost my place, and am thinking only of the little girl imitating her mother's friend, Saint Geneviève, and making her vows of virginity before the Bishop of Reims, at the tender age of ten years. It is very restful sitting here in the darkness, listening to the whispering of voices, trying to picture the church as it was at the time of its consecration.

I suppose it was mostly built of wood. Those vast pillars and barrel roof, ancient as they are, cannot date back to those days. But the altar stone is probably the same which the princess found in the forest, and as to the black statue of Notre Dame des Miracles, no one who has seen it can doubt its being that of the ancient goddess of the place, removed and resculptured by order of King Clovis, that it might preside over the new church, which his daughter built at Mauriacum.

As I gazed up at the dusky form, I pictured the scene. This spot had long been the sanctuary of some heathen deity. Here stood the sacred dolmen, where, probably, some ancestor chief lay buried. The Druids had taken possession of the tomb, using it as an altar; the Romans, according to some, had raised here a statue to the god Mercury. Here it was that the young Gaulish chief Basolus came to worship, perhaps, even, it was here he vowed allegiance to the king of the Wisigoths, whom the Gauls of Cantal had come to regard as their overlord. But the reign of the Wisigoths was over, and Basolus, conquered by Thierry, son of Clovis, was taken away to Sens, and flung into a dungeon to await his doom.

I had arrived at this point of my meditations, when a sudden draught caused the solitary candle before the altar to flare, and in the light, for a moment, I seemed to see Théodechilde herself, newly arrived to take possession of the Château de Montsélis, the confiscated home of the unhappy Basolus!

She has retired to her chamber, but is too excited, by the strangeness of her surroundings, to sleep. The castle is built beside the river Auze, but all around it, is the forest. The sound of the whispering leaves distracts the

thoughts of the young girl from her prayers. Rising at last, she goes toward the window, and opens the shutter. There is nothing so full of mystery as the forest at night! To Théodechilde's overwrought mind, the trees seemed talking to one another, waving their great arms slowly in the wind, while ghostly clouds flitted by, and the moon looked down with a sidelong glance, as though fearful what she might see in the murky depths! The princess shuddered, and her hand was already stretched out to close the window, when, far away, in the thickest part of the wood, she saw a light. It was so bright, so all-pervading, that it seemed to her not of this world, and with the ready instinct of a self-conscious sixth century saint of eighteen, she instantly concluded that here was some heavenly sign intended for herself. So falling on her knees, her eyes still fixed on the mysterious radiance, she uttered her prayer. From an ancient manuscript we know the very words:

"Oh, Seigneur Dieu, who hast hidden many things from the wise, revealing them to the little ones, I believe that this vision proceeds from Thee. Grant me, therefore, the knowledge of it, that I may glorify Thee my God, and the Virgin Mary, Thy Mother."

As soon as it was day, the young princess set off into the forest; and just where she had seen the light, found a Druid altar, before which burned a candle, "brighter than any star:" while, as some say, upon the altar itself, was the black statue now worshipped at Mauriac as Notre Dame des Miracles. All this was wonderful enough, but it must have been still more startling to find a lioness, with three young lions, guarding the sacred place. They fled however, as Théodechilde made the sign of the Cross, and the girl,

after returning thanks for the miracle, went back to the castle.

That night, lying on her bed between sleeping and waking, she saw a vision—the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child in her arms, and before her, bearing a candle in one hand, and his keys in the other, Saint Peter. Three times they made the tour of her bed, then left the chamber, and from her window she saw them wending their way to the place of lions, while all the air was full of rustling wings and heavenly music.

I was watching too, fascinated, when the thud of a padded door made me start. It was the sacristan with his lantern, his nailed boots resounding through the silent church. One by one he locked the gates of the chapels, and, as he did so, the women rose, signed themselves, and went silently out into the night like phantoms. As the old man returned from fastening the gate into the sanctuary, he saw me. "Pardon, Madame," he said, coming toward me, "pray do not disturb yourself. I can wait till you have finished your prayer."

"To tell the truth I was not praying," said I, with a smile. "I was meditating on the life of your patron saint."

"It is the same thing," answered the sacristan, "Monseigneur l'Archiprêtre will have no one disturbed in their meditations."

But I had already risen. "I am coming in the morning," said I, "perhaps you will then show me round the church, and tell me the history of Saint Théodechilde."

"Très volontiers, Madame! But you must see

Monseigneur himself. Il sera ravi de vous donner des renseignements au sujet de notre patronne, bien-aimée!"

For a few moments longer I waited, trying to coax my mind back to the twentieth century. Then, still among the mists of the past, rose and went out. Passing the ancient Lanterne des Morts, which for more than eight hundred years was lighted every night, to keep watch over the graves in the churchyard, and the cross on which the murdered body of a former rector of Mauriac was nailed during the Terror, I at last regained the Ecu de France.

A dance was being held at a café up the street, and for a long time the sound of the fiddles and the accordion kept me awake. Once there was a break in the music. Perhaps some fair Mauriacoise had promised the same dance to two partners! At all events there was a great to-do about something. From the noise you would have thought they were murdering each other. Girls screamed, men shouted, all the dogs in the place woke up and rushed, tumultuously barking, to see the fun. Then a laugh broke out, another, there was a sound of glasses being clinked amicably, the violin tuned up, the accordion gave a preliminary squeak, and next moment they were dancing away as merrily as ever! At last they went home. I could hear their voices singing down the street. Then a door banged, and for a moment there was silence, blessed silence! But, just as I was dropping asleep, a dog barked, then another and another! Between them, they kept it up till the cocks began crowing at three, and before one had grown accustomed to the different voices of the cocks, the early diligences and farmers' carts came rattling in, and cows and sheep and pigs joined in the

chorus, till Maurice woke to the consciousness of its being Market Day!

Our breakfast was served in Madame's bureau, a delightful little old-fashioned room, with a huge chimney and red-tiled floor, and a door through which I could watch the white-capped cook busy among his copper pots and pans. Madame herself was fussing about like a much perturbed hen, preparing for the great weekly lunch to be held presently in the *salle-à-manger*.

Madame was a widow, as she pathetically informed us; but from the number of portly farmers she seemed to have tied to her black apron strings, I think the period of her mourning must have been drawing to a close! I had arranged to accompany her to market that morning, to learn all about the price of butter and cheese. But, as she explained, it was already a little late when we appeared, so after she had seen us comfortably seated at the window with our coffee, she tied on her black hat, and, promising to look out for me, off she started! "Fanchette, Fanchette!" I heard her cry, as she hurried down the hall, "Mon Dieu! Comme tu es lente! Allons! Allons, ma fille!" and she bustled off along the street, followed by a buxom girl in a white cap carrying two immense black baskets.

We found the market-place a seething mass of men, women, children, and every kind of domestic animal! I despaired of ever finding my friends in such a crowd, and was turning away, when I heard a girl's voice: "Voilà! Les Anglais!" and was hailed by a hearty voice, "Hé! Hé! Par ici, Madame, par ici!"

Next moment we were standing at the top of a long avenue of white-capped women, each seated behind a huge basket of eggs, a stack of butter and cheese, while at her

side, ready to be picked up and exhibited to any would-be customer, lay a bunch or two of wretched fowls. And the talking, the clacking, the screaming, the bargaining. Oh, la! la! as Madame would have said! If I didn't learn much about the price of butter, I was a good deal enlightened on the subject of the Cantal character! Bargain? You never heard anything like it!

"How much do you ask for your eggs to-day?"

"I am selling them at a sou the piece, Madame."

"A sou? My poor Margot! You must be joking! And eggs like that, par exemple!"

"Eh bien," replies the woman, calmly, "we will say 22 for a franc. I would not be grasping with Madame, who is so good a customer."

"Oh, but I cannot! I am not a millionaire. I am but a poor widow. See, I will take ten dozen, at 40 a franc!"

"Mais non, mais non! The eggs are of the best. I might perhaps sell for 30 a franc, but not a sou less, and then, only because my poor Jean lost a calf last week. Oh Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Quel malheur!"

"Allons!" exclaimed Madame, quite unmoved by the piteous complaint, which I suspect she had heard many times before. "Allons! I will take them at 35 the franc! And twelve dozen, bien comptés."

"I cannot, Madame, indeed I cannot! It is robbing my Paul of his last chance of a pair of sabots for his first communion!"

And so on, and so on! At last the bargain was concluded, my landlady taking a dozen more than she had intended, and the farmer's wife adding an extra egg for each franc. After watching the same process repeated over the week's butter and cheese, I turned to look at the general scene. Everyone was bargaining, the voices rose



THE MARKET PLACE, MAURIAC

and fell. As a purchase was completed, hand was slapped in hand, after the old Celtic fashion you will see used at every fair. Often a violent quarrel arose, and, for a time, relations seemed so strained that one really held one's breath with excitement. But the dispute invariably ended with the shaking of hands, and, in many cases, a visit to the neighbouring wine-shop. For, though the Auvergnat is the closest-fisted man on earth, where the taking of money is concerned, he has his own fashion of spending it, and entertains royally when it suits his humour. Indeed he sometimes reminds me of a little boy I know, who will save and pinch and resort to all kinds of mean tricks the whole year, on purpose to be able to buy presents for his family at Christmas.

Even his marriage, the Auvergnat arranges with a due regard to financial considerations. When a young man falls in love, the first thing he does is to tell his father, who, next day, dressed in his best, goes over to the farm of the prospective bride. There, carefully left to himself, he takes a good look at the contents of the barns and stables. Then, if satisfied, he will go to the house and inspect the linen and furniture, and finally, if all comes up to his expectations, negotiations are begun. These are conducted by the lawyer, and a friend of mine has told me that it is not at all unusual, even at the last moment, for a marriage to be broken off, for the sake of a couple of pounds. Sometimes a pair of sabots or a new smock will be thrown in as a make-weight.

Yet these mercenary marriages are by no means unhappy, and the home of the young people is always open to anyone who is in need of a meal or a night's lodging. This very landlady, for instance, who has just driven such a bargain over her week's eggs, keeps open house for any

poor old creature who comes in from the country to sell a hen. She will haggle over the price of the chicken for an hour, and then give twice its value in food and lodging. But see, she has finished her purchases, and is waiting for me.

"I shall go to the Church," say I. "I could not see it last night, and Monseigneur l'Archiprêtre is going to tell me about Saint Théodechilde."

"Bien, bien!" she cries, evidently relieved, and with an "à tout à l'heure" off she goes, Fanchette following, looking like a sulky mule, with a great pannier on each side.

Unfortunately Monseigneur was engaged in hearing confessions. The market women appeared to have an extraordinary amount on their consciences that morning; and, though I waited for quite a long time, the good priest never came out of his retirement, and the throng of kneeling figures in the church never lessened. So, at last, the sacristan took me in charge, and showed me the Merovingian font, of painted granite, and the fetters of the two soldiers, delivered from their Spanish prison, because of their devotion to and faith in Our Lady of Miracles. As I looked at the heavy irons, the old man told the story.

"They fell asleep in their prison," concluded he, "calling on the name of Notre Dame de Mauriac, and they woke here, before the very door of Her Chapel! Is it a wonder that, at Her Festival, we carry before Her the fetters of those she so miraculously delivered?"

"When is the Festival?" I asked eagerly.

But he replied that it was in the spring, the Sunday next after the 9th of May.

Finding us so interested in the church, he took us to see the treasures of the sacristy—the ancient bronze statue of the Virgin, a very pagan-looking relic; and, lighting his

long taper, let me have a really good view of La Bonne Dame herself, with her strange bovine features, and Merovingian coiffure. And all the while he kept giving me the popular Mauriac version of the coming of Théodechilde. I'm afraid I am not so well up in the Merovingian period of French history as I ought to be,—at all events there were a great many incidents of which I had never heard. I knew, of course, about the marriage of Clovis with Clothilde, of his conversion and baptism by Saint Rémi, and of the coming of the mysterious white dove with the Ampoule containing the sacred oil. But I had never properly understood about Basolus, the young Gaulish chief, and how he came to give up his castle to the Princess Théodechilde. Poor young things! It is a story that must often have had its counterpart in those warlike days. The young girl, among her other good works, was accustomed to visit the prisons, and there, in his dungeon at Sens, she met, for the first time, Basolus. He must have been a magnificent young fellow from all accounts, with the charm of the Celt, and the refinement of the Roman, very different from the coarse ignorant cruel brothers of Théodechilde. He was an Arian, and day after day the young girl sat with him, teaching and exhorting him, promising that if he would join the Catholic Church, she would persuade her father to spare his life. Of course you guess the end of the story. She was fair and sweet, he brave and handsome, and they were both young. So one day, finding Clovis in a particularly good temper (I think it was just after his great slaughter of the Wisigoths, when he smashed Alaric's skull with his own battle-axe), down she fell on her knees.

"A boon, my father, a boon!" she cried. And Clovis, who, savage tyrant that he was, could refuse this daughter

nothing, stroked her fair hair and smiled encouragingly. But, when he heard that it was the life of the young Gaulish captive, who had given his son Thierry such a world of trouble, his brow clouded. Perhaps Clothilde had told him of Théodechilde's intimacy with Basolus, perhaps he had heard how attractive the young Gaul was, perhaps the princess, as she made the request, blushed (if girls in those days had anything left to blush for), yet he could not bear to disappoint her. Besides, these Frankish women had enormous influence over their men-folk. A man might be as wicked as he liked—it was his “*métier*”—his wife and daughters must be angels! In reading about those times it really seems as though the Merovingian and Carolingian kings trusted to the purity and righteousness of their women to carry their wicked souls to Paradise! Poor Clovis had many sins on his conscience, and his sons, he knew, had already more than he. He had been counting on this daughter of his to work out their salvation for them, as Abbess of the convent he was building at Sens: and here she was, trembling and blushing at his feet, begging for the life of a handsome young man who was, moreover, his bitterest foe. But not for nothing was Clovis descended from the “Old Man of the Sea”! After a few moments, his face cleared.

“Rise!” said he, “you shall have your wish, oh my daughter, Basolus is pardoned. *But,*” and his green eyes gleamed craftily, “on one condition—all his land shall be bestowed on you, my dearest Théodechilde, and he shall become a monk in the monastery of Sens.”

Poor Théodechilde! Poor Basolus! I knew now what kept her from sleeping, as she sat at the window of what had been his chamber in the Vieux Château de Montselis par Mauriac. She was thinking of those handsome dark

curls she had loved, and wondering what the young chief looked like, with his monkish tonsure. And Basolus? What must he have thought of this young girl, so richly endowed at his expense? Did he blame her, or did he guess how it came about? Perhaps they met, the monk and the abbess, later, and poured out their griefs to each other; or perhaps Théodechilde found means of sending him a letter, hidden in some royal book of hours. Or perhaps—but that is too sad—he went on thinking her a sly mercenary puss to the end of his days, and died in the cell, which for so long was his prison, hating the white sanctimonious face of the little saint!

Saint Mary, whom we have already met on the road to Brioude, is a great saint at Mauriac. He had a hermitage on the hill just outside the town, and was finally buried here by one of the Chatelaines of Apchon—Ermengarde de Rochedagoux.

I should like to go back to Mauriac and stay in my old oak-panelled room. Every morning I would wander about the country breathing the sweet fresh mountain air, lying among the flowery pastures with a book. After lunch it would be pleasant to go and sit on the fortifications, and play with the children till it was time to go to Vespers, and dream an hour away in the company of the great Black Virgin and the little White Saint. And on the way home, after gossiping with the good "Mauriaquoises," who would have grown accustomed to my presence in their midst, I would turn in at Kostmann's, the little dark bookshop, where one meets with so many tit-bits of Auvergnat history. And after supper I would sit in Madam's bureau and write a real story of the town, not a wretched little sketch like this, but a solid volume, telling all about the fights between the abbots of Mauriac and Sens,

and the bishop who was shut up at Ventadour, and the awful time when the town was taken by the Huguenots in 1574, and all it suffered during the days of the Terror. But we should only come back to Théodechilde and Basolus, for their spirits haunt the place, and we meet them wherever we wander. Some legends come and go, and, like Shakespeare's "unsubstantial vision, leave not a wrack behind." But the story of these ancient lovers, for such they surely were, lives to-day in every stone of Mauriac, gilding the sunshine, silvering the moonlight, deepening the shadows, giving this old town of Cantal an atmosphere all its own.

CHAPTER XIV

Saint - Julien - au - Bois—Saint - Privat—Argentat—Beaulieu—Rocamadour—Story of Zaccheus—The Black Virgin of Rocamadour—Domme—Cardouin—The legend of La Saint Suaire—Capelou—Saint-Émilion—Angoulême—Poitiers—Saint Radegonde

AND now, alas, our wanderings in Auvergne are over! Yet, if we must make our way homeward, let it be by the longest road possible, and, above all, let us visit that greatest of Black Virgins—Our Lady of Rocamadour.

Years and years ago I heard of her, and her three rock chapels—one above the other—and ever since then I have been longing to make the pilgrimage. The automobile is not anxious to get back to the flinty roads of Sussex, and my dear chauffeur-photographer declares he is not tired either. So down into the Valley of the Dordogne, reader, and God be with us!

A lovely valley, clothed in forest, part of the same forest owned by poor Basolus—for his estates reached far over the country. Now and then we pass a village, and once, stopping at an ancient church, find ourselves attending a funeral. But nothing can damp our spirits this glorious morning. Now we are crossing a high heathery moorland gay with sheaves of flaming genesta. Behind, growing more distant moment by moment, are the mountains of Cantal, and, looking back, I catch between two hills a glimpse of the Puy de Sancy, smiling his farewell at us.

And in all this breeze-swept waste of earth and sky not

a soul to be seen ! Now and again, in a village, we stop and try to ask our way, but are not always successful, for the Auvergnat patois still pursues us, though in some mysterious way I am beginning to understand it a little, and can already ask for a glass of milk, or a hunk of bread and butter.

By eleven o'clock we came upon some chestnut trees, whose perfume put us in mind of that tea by the roadside on our journey down, and made us so hungry that we determined to lunch at Saint-Privat. On the road we passed an old castle, called Saint-Julien-au-Bois. Over the door were sculptured the arms of a forgotten family, and the great stone staircase in its tower led us up to vast rooms, with huge open chimneys. But only peasants now sit beside the hearths, and sleep behind the red curtains of the cupboard beds crowded along the walls. I never knew the story of the place. It probably ceased at the time of the Revolution. The man who rented the "dining hall" tried to tell me something about it, but he had lost his front teeth, and in any case, his French was but indifferent, so I only gathered that it had been built by the English, which certainly accorded with the thirteenth century style of its architecture.

Saint-Privat boasts two inns—deadly rivals ! From one—a "whited sepulchre"—we fled in horror. The other proved excellent.

While waiting for lunch we strolled over to the church, where a pleasant-faced priest was catechising a score or so of little ones on the life of their third century patron.

"And what did le Bien Heureux reply to the wicked men who wanted him to sacrifice to their false gods ?"

A long pause, and then a little hand held up.

"Eh bien, Julien, qu'est-ce que c'est?"

"He said: 'I wonder you dare ask such a thing of me!'" came the answer.

"Bien, pétiot, and what else?"

"And then they whipped him and tore him all to pieces!" cried a little girl, with evident enjoyment.

"And they burned the sore places with hot irons!" screamed another.

"*Très bien*, Jeanne, you have remembered well. And where was the good bishop buried?"

But just as I was about to hear, the door opened, and a boy came to tell us that déjeuner was ready. And after all, the great thing at Saint-Privat turned out to be the déjeuner. Martyred saints are all very well in their way, but when it comes to twelve o'clock—martyred chickens are better!

They had served lunch on a little terrace at the back of the inn; a happy inspiration, for without the fresh air we could never have done justice to half the *ménu*. Again and again I declared I had finished, when a new dish would tempt me to fresh efforts. In my notebook I find that luncheon occupying quite a prominent place. There was melon, soup, foie gras, chicken, haricots verts, grilled cutlets, rabbit dressed like hare, beside numberless other dainties, ending up with great luscious peaches, the memory of which makes my mouth water yet.

"Pray who cooked this lunch?" I asked of the dark-eyed, apple-cheeked, Mongolian-looking beauty who waited on us.

"C'est moi, Madam," she answered modestly, "un petit peu le patron—mais c'est moi surtout," and with intense interest she watched as I tasted each course.

Beyond Saint-Privat the road climbs once more on to the moorland, still bounded on the horizon by the turquoise

and amethyst mountains. Now, on turning a corner we saw lying far below us, the valley of the Dordogne, grown, by this time, into a broad placid middle-aged opulent river, yet with a twinkle in its eye that reminded one of the stream we had known higher up. And there, bathing her feet in the river, like some young girl, sat the Celtic town of Argentat. For a moment we drew up beside a barley field, gay with poppies and cornflowers, and enjoyed the charming sight. Then next moment we were plunging down toward the river.

I don't think I have ever seen a more charming town than Argentat. The broad quay is lined with ancient turretted houses; a dream of white walls, draped with hanging wooden balconies full of flowers, rich browns and reds of shadowy roofs, and the blue-green depths of the river.

I was standing on the bridge with my head under the black cloth, when a delightful old priest accosted one of us, and took us to see a private collection of prehistoric implements, discovered in the neighbourhood. He told us of the dolmen of Argentat, the great stone which they say Roland the Paladin took out of his shoe when he was crossing the valley on his way to the Pyrenees.

After leaving Argentat, the road runs along by the river—the loveliest road, high wooded hills on either hand, now shutting us in, now opening a hair's-breadth for us to pass. Sometimes under the chestnut shadows, the automobile and the Dordogne run racing side by side, the great river rippling with laughter at the efforts of the little car! Sometimes the road draws back, and between us and the water are bright green meadows and cornfields, where handsome-looking people in big sunhats, and broad blue trousers, belted round the waist with crimson sashes, are reaping the ripe ears with the sickle.



ON THE BANKS OF THE DORDOGNE

Through Brivesac with Romanesque church and vine-hung cottages we fly. The vines are calling us to stop and photograph them, but on on we hasten in a delirious dream of golden sunlight, cool brown shadows, scented flowers, birds' song and the blue sheen of the whispering river. Once, when owing to a rise in the road, we were running some forty feet above the stream, we saw, lying below us, the red roofs of a town, and scrambling down the bank, found Beaulieu with its wonderful church and market-place. But I cannot describe all the details of that journey.

It is evening.

For some time we have been running over the comparatively level country of Quercy, and being tired I have ceased to notice the road. In a little town, Gramat, if I remember rightly, we stop to ask the way. It is already so dark that I can scarcely see the face of the man who answers me. After that I remember a railway crossing, a turn to the left, a tunnel through a rock. . . . We stopped but just in time. Another foot or two and our journey would have ended abruptly with a sudden leap into the Vallée Ténébreuse.

As we peered down awed into the yawning gulf, we could see lights twinkling as though in mid air, and, as our eyes became accustomed to the dusk, could distinguish vast rocky walls soaring tier above tier, crowned on the summit by the battlements of a castle, and the arms of a gigantic calvary, silhouetted black against the sky. Then we began creeping down into the abyss, and the further we descended, the blacker grew the night, and the higher the cliffs, which on every side enclose this amazing valley of Rocamadour.

At last, a gateway, at which a girl is waiting. "Hôtel du Lion d'Or?" she inquires. And in another moment we have alighted and are climbing up the staircase to the hotel.

Everyone since the time of Zaccheus himself has been to Rocamadour, and everyone has tried to describe it. But whether one paints, photographs, or writes, it eludes one, like a mirage, and if you are a wise person you will give up the attempt. Yet here am I, trying my luck with the rest.

Even as I followed the landlady to my little white cell of a bedroom, I knew that I was in a rock dwelling, for only the front of the "Lion d'Or" has windows, and it is but one room thick. But it was not till later that I found my way up through the roof to the garden, and from the garden, climbed by a steep stairway to the monastery and chapels. Then as I looked up, and still found only rock frowning down upon me, I began, in truth, to realize my surroundings. A little later, when the moon came out, and showed the buildings like a mass of swallows' nests, one above the other clinging to the mountain side, and the little galleries and stairways winding about among the cracks and crannies, I felt the hopelessness of words, and going down to my room, sat up half the night searching for suitable adjectives to describe the wonderful place.

No one knows the origin of Rocamadour. When, after his return from a journey to Rome, Zaccheus found his wife Veronica dead, he abandoned the little hermitage at Bordeaux, where they had lived together, and found his way up the Dordogne. Perhaps he came upon the Vallée Ténébreuse suddenly, as we did. Perhaps someone told him of the human sacrifices, which the Druids still offered

to the mysterious Black Mother Soulivia, who reigned in the cavern temple half way up the rock. At all events, he settled beside her door in a hermitage he scooped out for himself in the face of the cliff. "Amadour" he was called, for was it not he, who, ever since that memorable day when he climbed up into the sycamore tree, had watched over and tended the young Teacher of Nazareth, showing his love and devotion to such a degree that the early Christians knew him as the Lover of Our Lord—"Amadour."

It was not long before the enthusiasm of Zaccheus prevailed over the cold philosophy of the Druids—as it was bound to do, and the shrine of the Black Mother became known as the Miraculous Chapel of the Blessed Virgin. Whether the statue we see is that of the ancient goddess Soulivia, or whether, as the Sister in charge will aver, it was carved by Saint Luke and brought hither by the good Amadour, I cannot say. There it stands, and below is an altar which is as great a puzzle as the statue itself! To-day it is enclosed and concealed in an outer covering of bronze. But beneath the casing is a very old stone altar, with no place for relics, only a hole, a sort of drain, through which, before the time of the gentle Amadour, the blood of the human sacrifices offered to the goddess Soulivia used to run.

While I was staying at Rocamadour I used to go to the Chapel of Notre Dame while they were chanting the Rosary, and look up at the little dusky face above the altar, and wonder whether the Black Mother was pleased when Amadour put an end to the bloody sacrifices.

But it is a foolish speculation. The Black Mother, or whatever she was called, signified to those pre-Christian

worshippers at Rocamadour the highest ideal of which they were able to conceive, and to her they sacrificed their best—and what can man do more?

With the advent of Zaccheus came a still more lofty conception of the divine, and he taught them that it was the sacrifice of themselves, their souls and bodies, which was required by the Mother and Her Son. So there she sits, smiling down, and, as her pilgrims offer the golden hearts, emblematical of the lives they vow shall for the future be spent in her service, she feels, or rather the goodness and mercy she typifies feels, more satisfaction in the modern worship than in the ancient.

It is very restful sitting in the twilight, listening to the singing of the good Sisters. The chapel is built into the cliff, and the west wall is nothing but a rough face of rock, blackened for countless ages with the smoke of innumerable votive candles. There they burn continually, set in iron rings, and their shifting glow lights up the crutches, epaulettes, chains, fetters, and strangest of all, several models of ships! For this inland Virgin is intimately associated with sailors. Do you see that little bell up there? It hangs high in the roof, half hidden by the banners and decorations. Very possibly it is the self-same bell with which Zaccheus summoned his converts to worship—it is certainly ancient enough! Formerly it hung in a turret outside the chapel, and though it was never furnished with a cord, it rang occasionally. When it rang, it was a sign that the Blessed Virgin, whose bell it was, had performed a very special miracle to someone in distress, who had called upon Her name, and particularly sailors in danger of shipwreck.

Just outside the door the hermit hollowed his tomb

in the rock, and there they laid him, when, in the year 75, he died at the foot of the altar in the adjoining chapel. He was such a humble-minded saint that the place of his sepulture was quickly forgotten, and it was not till 1146, as the monks of Rocamadour were seeking a spot where to lay someone who had desired to be buried near to the entrance to the chapel, that they came upon the tomb of the hermit. As the inscription says: "Ici fut découvert en 1146 le corps, parfaitement conservé, de Zachée, l'ami de Notre Seigneur." They recognized the skeleton, so "little of stature," immediately, and removed it to a special chapel, setting it up in a niche, where, through a grille, the faithful could reverence it. And here it remained till the Huguenots tore it from its place and burned it, together with all the other relics they could find. But some of the body of Amadour escaped, and notably his skull, which may still be seen at Rocamadour. And as for his spirit, it is all around us, as we climb up and down the face of the cliff, and visit the monastery and the many chapels and sacred caverns with which it is honeycombed.

I was sitting on the bench in front of the tomb, where, in a great stone coffin, lies an ancient wooden statue of the incorruptible body of the dead Amadour, when an old priest came and seated himself beside me. His friends, he said, had climbed up to the castle, but it was too steep for him, he would rather sit here, in the sunshine, and think about Zaccheus.

He had been often to Rocamadour and knew the legends of the place. After pointing out the thirteenth century "Dance of Death" and the "Sword of Roland," stuck in the wall above the enormous alms-box, he went on, telling me how the Palladin, after every victory, would come to

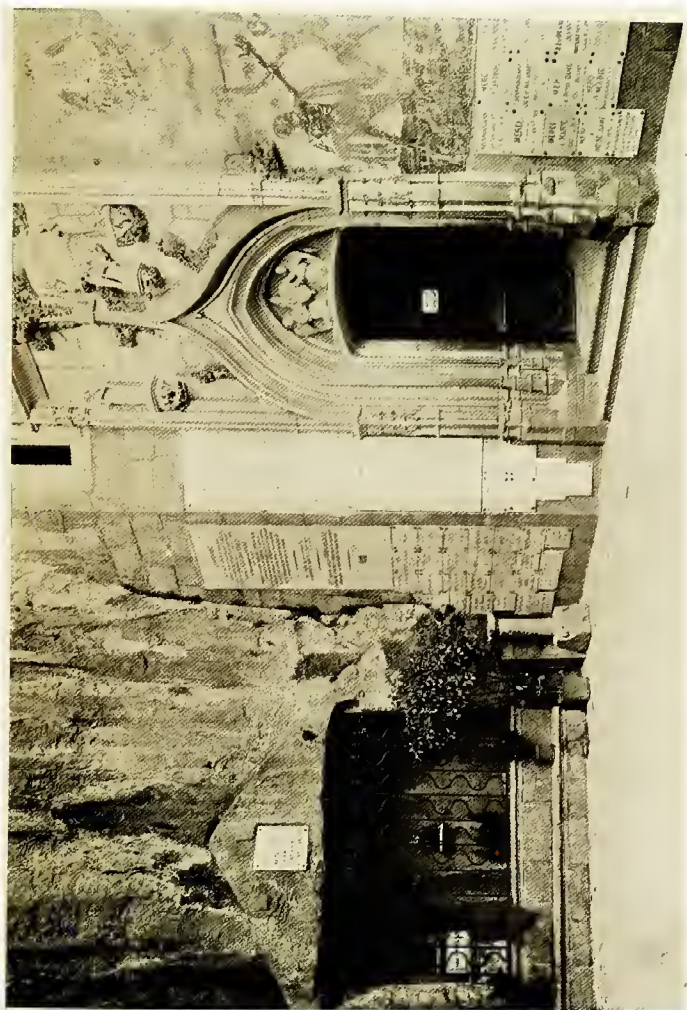
return thanks, and leave his sword Durandal in pledge, to be redeemed later from the Black Virgin for its weight in silver. He said that it was still the custom of young girls to come with their fiancés and try to pull the sword out of the wall. "If they succeed, it means they will be married within the year," said he with a smile.

The old gentleman had assisted at the annual pilgrimage some few years previously, and told me that 100,000 pilgrims had visited the chapel during the week, between the 8th and 16th of September.

When he had rested, we climbed the narrow stairs to the ancient chapel of Saint Michel and looked down from the little balcony, whence the Bishop of Cahors blesses the pilgrims gathered below. As my old friend left me, he asked if I belonged to the Roman Church. "No," said I, "I am English, I belong to the church of my country." "Ah," said he, politely, "but it is a Christian church, it is but a less direct way to the same Paradise," with which broad-minded remark he left me to join his friends, and I was alone with the chief of the publicans.

So there I sat by Amadour's grave, thinking over the past glories of the sanctuary. To the right lay the monastery, with its great Salle de Reception, once the Salon of the Bishops of Tulle. Just below I could catch a glimpse of La Cour d'Honneur round which are grouped the chapels of Saint Jean, Saint Blaise, Sainte Anne, Saint Amadour. From here there is a view down the vast flight of steps leading to the valley, the steps up which the pilgrims, whether peasants or kings, crawled humbly on their knees,—and there was scarcely a king of old who did not visit Rocamadour.

In the beautiful chapel of Saint Sauveur, which opens from that of Our Lady, we shall find the names of some



THE GRAVE OF ZACHEUS AND THE ENTRANCE TO THE MIRACULOUS CHAPEL OF N.D. DE
ROCAMADOUR

of them figuring on the walls. There was our own Henry II., who arrived, laden with chains, to beg forgiveness for the murder of Thomas à Becket. I wonder if the fetters in the chapel were his? And Louis the Saint came with his three brothers and their mother Queen Blanche, bearing rich offerings for the Virgin Mother of the Vallée Ténébreuse. Afterwards, Charles le Bel and Philippe de Valois did homage to their suzeraine "La Reine de La France," as the Black Virgin had come to be called. And last, but not least, up the great staircase crawled Louis XI "bourgeois et populaire," paying his devotions, in the character of a simple pilgrim, to La Vierge Noire.

And beside these, and many other royal personages, there was, through the Middle Ages, a never-ceasing stream of bishops, nobles, peasants, so that the stairs and galleries were constantly thronged with worshippers, and the riches and fame of the Black Virgin increased, till they equalled those of Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle and Saint-Martin-de-Tours.

To-day it is quiet and empty.

"Did you have many pilgrims this last festival?" I inquire of the pretty Sister, as I pay for the books I have just bought.

"No!" says she, shaking her head sadly. "It has been a bad season, and the people are poor. It will be a hard winter for them and for us."

These Sisters, I found, are still allowed to teach the children of Rocamadour, but only on condition that, when doing so, they lay aside their religious garb. "But we are glad to remain on any terms," said the Sister, "for it brings us into contact with the people, and now in one way, now in another, we are able to sow among them the good seed which is so sorely needed in these days."

Thus the work of Zaccheus still goes on, and the light he kindled at Rocamadour shines down over the sea of secularism, which, in France, has replaced the paganism of the first century.

It is very hard to leave Rocamadour! Even after we have climbed out of the valley, I find my mind returning regretfully to the peaceful spot, so that it is but vaguely I remember the afternoon, or even our quarters for the night; which is perhaps as well, for Sarlat, where we stayed, is a wretched, squalid place, where even the golden moon, which lighted it after dinner, failed to discover any charms.

But Domme! What a place for an artist! I suppose when the English besieged it, during the Hundred Years' War, there was little save the castle buildings within the ramparts which still crown the great rock above the Dordogne. To-day, as one enters the frowning gateway, one finds oneself in the little square of a village which has sprung up within the walls. Flowers are hanging everywhere, from the balconies, the walls, the overhanging eaves of the white houses. The inn, at which we stop for a glass of wine, has a courtyard roofed with vines, from which the grapes are already hanging in little clusters, and the streets are so narrow and steep, that I think they must have originally been the staircases and corridors of the ancient castle. But of that castle itself nothing remains. The landlord, it is true, took us to see the threshing floor, where the corn was brought from all the surrounding neighbourhood, for the lord of Domme to take his lion's share. It is evidently still used by the peasants, for there were ears of corn lying about. But the old mill beside it is in ruins. From it one can look right down over the valley of the Dordogne, and watch the river for miles and

miles winding its way past meadows and villages, toward the far-off ocean in the west. Our guide pointed out the spot from which the Black Prince bombarded the castle, and showed us the gateway with its Salle de Garde, and the prison walls covered with the usual pathetic carvings, crosses, figures of the Christ His arms spread wide, and inscriptions which I have forgotten.

"And what are these?" I asked, pointing to a spot where the stone was pock-marked at a height varying from five feet four to eight. For answer, the man called a girl, and stood her with her back to the wall; at the same time raising an imaginary gun, and aiming at her head, which was on a level with many of the holes.

"It was the place of execution," he explained briefly, letting his arm fall to his side.

We lunched at Domme, in the dearest little room, opening off the vine-covered courtyard I have mentioned. Our host had four boys at home, the eldest about ten; and it was this youth who waited on us, a serviette over his arm, his bare legs and socks just showing beneath his little white apron. His face was grave and self-important, as that of the head waiter at the Savoy. It was like looking at a family butler through the wrong end of a telescope! In fact the boy, in his way, was perfect.

"When you are grown up, you will be a maître d'hôtel, n'est-ce pas?" I asked encouragingly.

"Mais oui, Madame," as though that were a foregone conclusion.

"A Paris?" I inquired, somewhat crushed by his assurance.

"Oui, Madame, à Paris," and with a respectful, "Pardon, Madame," he removed the cheese plate on which I had, in my careless way, settled some cherries, and put before me

another, which he had been polishing with his official serviette.

"The coffee?" said my husband, thinking to catch him at a disadvantage. The solemn eyes rested on him in humble reproof.

"Il est en train, Monsieur," and he slipped out silently to the yard. "En suite!" we heard him cry imperiously to his mother in the kitchen, and next moment he was back, subservient as ever, putting the sugar and biscuits noiselessly before us.

"And pray, who taught you all this?" I ask, admiringly.

"Madame, it is my brother. He is sixteen, and already at Bordeaux."

"When you are sixteen, you must come to England and learn English."

"Possibly, Madame, but," with a blasé air, "I learned English when at school."

Sapré nom d'un chien! as his father would probably have said, what a child!

But if we are going to linger so, at every place, we shall never reach home! We have scarcely time to glance at La Roque-Gageac hanging to its sandstone cliff, or Castlenau, once the home of our own Henry the Second.

Beynac, too, with its picturesque little quay and old houses hanging over the river, has to be left without a visit. The Dordogne is very lovely here, broad, and full of islands on which any number of hermits might take up their abode!

Later, we come to Cadouin, and there we must pause, if only to see the Gothic cloisters, perhaps the finest in France. I had an introduction to the Dean of Cadouin, who told me the story of the Saint Suaire, the cloth which wrapped Our Lord's head, as He lay in the tomb; and showed



SHIPPING WINE ON THE DORDOGNE

me, carved among the vaulting of the cloisters, the story of its translation to Cadouin. This proved so long and wonderful, that the curate had to come more than once to call us to lunch. And it was as we were sitting in the ancient panelled dining-room, where Louis the Eleventh no doubt lunched, when he came hither on his pilgrimage, that I heard the conclusion of the matter.

It appears that this wonderful cloth which, as the Dean assured me, covered Our Saviour down to the knees, was embroidered by His Mother, in anticipation of His death. It is a curious cloth, very much like that still used in some parts of Brittany for laying over the faces of the dead. The Virgin, brought up in the Temple, was, as all the world knows, a great needlewoman; and these embroideries on the Saint Suaire are said to be her finest work. After the resurrection, it passed into the family of a rich Jewish convert, who, at his death, left it to one of his sons. But the young man cared more for money than religion, and sold the precious relic to his pious younger brother—and with it, all his luck. Every day he grew poorer, and as his fortunes declined, those of the younger son increased. For five generations the Suaire remained in his family, which prospered exceedingly.

After that, there are all manner of strange legends told of the cloth, which, at one time, was kept by seven virgins living in a solitary place on the banks of the Jordan. During the first Crusade, Adémar, Bishop of Le Puy who, as I have already said,¹ had gone to Palestine as the Pope's Legate, obtained possession of the Suaire at the taking of Antioch. Shortly after, falling sick of the plague, the brave bishop called his chaplain, and told him to convey the precious relic to the cathedral of Le Puy as his

¹ See page 62.

dying legacy. But it never reached its destination. Important relics seldom did in those days. Concealed beneath the false bottom of a barrel of wine, it found its way to Cussac, and thence—alas, that I should have to confess it—was stolen by the monks of Cadouin.

Yet, in spite of this, we were delighted with Cadouin.

The inn, though so old that the courtiers of Louis the Eleventh themselves may have stayed there, is clean and comfortable.

Above the gate leading to the church is the little room where the king is said to have slept.

And, more than all, there is the Dean, ready to talk for ever and ever, on the wonderful history of "*the Suaire*," as he proudly proclaims it.

Not far from Cadouin, we came to Capelou, where is one of those black Virgins said to have been discovered by an ox when ploughing. She is good, they say, for sick children, and for mothers in danger of their lives. Here, too, is a very ancient fountain, and a great chestnut tree, round which, on a raised bank of earth, the pilgrims sit on the day of the festival and eat roast fowl.

"I wish I had as many chickens as have been eaten beneath this tree, eh Jacques?" said the priest, as, accompanied by the Sacristan, we passed the tree, on the way to the vicarage.

"Mais oui, Monsieur le Curé!" ejaculated the man enviously.

At Monpazier, extraordinary relic of the English, we stop to take a photograph; and so to Bergerac, with its old wooden market hall, and war monument, and the quay by the river, where great white oxen, their faces veiled with netting, are drawing huge waines, laden with wine casks.



NONPAZIER



THE CHAPEL OF THE TRINITY, AND ENTRANCE TO THE ROCK CHURCH OF ST. EMILION

• It was somewhere on this road, not far from Castillon, that we came upon the Tertre de Talbot, the spot where, on the 17th of July 1453, fell John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, in that battle which ended for ever the war which, for a hundred years, had ravaged France.

And now, my patient reader, you must be as tired as I was when I reached Saint-Émilion. But before we say good-night, and turn in at the quaint hotel, we must surely visit the subterranean church, and the grotto of the troglodyte saint, who founded it. What the great rock temple was before his time, who can say? To-day, it is a vast cavern hewn out of a living hillside, the most ghostly overwhelming nightmare of a church I have ever seen. High up, in the vaulting, there are strange apocalyptic figures of winged beasts, and a great barbaric cross frowns indistinctly down, from what was once an altar. Everywhere open the entrances to tombs, black, yawning, mysterious; and the air is dank and heavy with the smell of earth. Down the dreadful nave I walked, fearfully, shuddering as though I were about to take part in some terrifying midnight ceremony of the dead. And, indeed, who knows what the horrible place was used for, before the coming of Saint-Émilion, for, in spite of what the guardian says, nothing will persuade me it was excavated by Christian monks. Yet, here they lie, buried in hollows along the base of the wall, apparently as comfortably as though they were in the cheerful precincts of the Champs Elysée.

Next door, so to speak, is the grotto of the sixth century hermit, Saint-Émilion, with its stone altar, chair, and bed, carved along the wall; and in a corner, the sacred well into which the young girls of the district throw pins, after the usual manner. But as far as I could discover,

no one remembers anything of the Saint. They know all about the English besieging the place, and Philippe le Bel driving them out, and taking possession of the old Château du Roi, whose huge square donjon still frowns down over the ramparts. And you may hear the story of the wars between the Huguenots and Catholics, and of the visit of Louis XII. and his gifts to the splendid parish church. But of Émilion himself, the only thing I could find really reliable, was the wine to which he had given his name. Troglodyte or no, he certainly must have been a judge of claret!

That night, after I had blown out the candle, the dark walls of my chamber seemed to expand, till I found myself back in the great Souterraine looking up the vast nave, to where, on the raised platform at the end, gleamed a faint ghostly radiance. Phantom forms flitted around the rock-hewn pillars, and dead monks knelt on either side of the chancel steps, while in the middle, celebrating some kind of black Mass, was the hermit himself. And this was the only glimpse I ever caught of this elusive saint!

A bright morning, and a busy town lying at the junction of two great rivers! It is Libourne, and from hence we turn northward, and begin the homeward journey in serious earnest.

Angoulême, set on a hill terraced with the remains of ancient fortifications! It was probably in La Grosse Tour, that the Black Prince took up his abode, after the battle of Poitiers. It formed part of the castle of the Counts of Angoulême, who, from the eighth century to the fourteenth, were independent rulers of the province. Here, in 1492, was born Marguerite de Valois, sister of Francis

the First. At Angoulême, Calvin lived and preached, earning his living as a teacher of Greek, and, no doubt, burning the midnight oil over notes for his great work, "Institutes of the Christian Religion."

But we must hasten on to Poitiers, our last stopping-place, as far as this book is concerned, where you and I, reader, must take leave of each other, after this long wandering together.

I remember so well the first time I visited Poitiers. It was in the very early days of motoring, and our great lumbering car came puffing and panting up the hill, vomiting steam and petrol fumes like some antediluvian dragon, so that all the people, attracted by its roaring, turned out to see the wondrous sight! Half way up it stopped, and, the brakes refusing to act, we began slipping down, and were only saved from destruction by the simple device of backing the car into a wall. It was the 14th of July, and after dinner, there were fireworks in the *Place*, and the ghostly old city was gay with rockets and lively with squibs and crackers.

But it takes many visits to know Poitiers. There is the Saracen story, ending with the great battle between Charles Martel and the Mussulman chief Abderahman, when 300,000 Saracens were left dead on the field.

And there is the later history of the English victory over King John of France. The Black Prince with his 12,000 men, suddenly confronted by 60,000 of the best-appointed troops in Europe! "Now, Sirs," said the Prince, "though we be but a small company, let us not be abashed therefore, for the victory lyeth nat in the multitude of people, but wher as God wyll send it. Therefore Sirs, for Goddes sake, I requyre you do your deuoyers this day, for if God

be pleased and Saynt George, this day ye shall see me a good knight."

And there are the churches of Poitiers, the Cathedral of Saint Pierre, founded by Henry the Second of England, [who, by the bye, must really have been a perfect godsend to the French ecclesiastical architects of those days. And there is the extraordinary Cathedral of Notre Dame des Clefs, with its Black Virgin, *patronne* of the city. You remember the story perhaps.

Poitiers besieged, by the English, was as straightly shut up as Jericho, the keys laid for safety at the feet of the Black Virgin. There was plenty of food and water, and the enemy was growing impatient. In fact, Poitiers only had to sit still and wait. But as the man who told me about it, remarked: "The worst enemies are not always those without." One night a "copper-head," whose name has, fortunately, been forgotten, his pockets full of English gold, stole into the Cathedral, snatched up the keys, and ran off through the darkness to the city gate. But when he reached it, imagine his terror! The keys were gone! One moment he had them, the next his hand was empty! And that was not all, for the following morning, at daybreak, there they lay, safely as ever, at the feet of the statue, which ever since has been known as "Notre Dame des Clefs."

But the church *par excellence* is that of Saint Radegonde, sixth wife of King Clotaire. Thierry has told her story so charmingly, that one hesitates to repeat it: and yet, it is in the presence of Saint Radegonde that we must say good-bye; and some of my readers may not be acquainted with this Thuringian princess.

As we sit in the great church, with its raised altar, and listen to the priests' voices chanting the office, there rises



THE CHURCH OF SAINT RADEGONDE, POITIERS

before us the image of a little brother and sister, away in far Thuringia, weeping over their dead father Berthaire, and taken away by his murderer to grace his court at Soissons. Even in those early days Clotaire had been struck by Radegonde's beauty, and the education he gave her, the care which was lavished upon her in her beautiful home at Athies, was intended to prepare her for the high destiny of becoming his wife. We cannot follow her through all the mournful story. The young girl of eighteen, already, as she believed, betrothed to the Christ, found herself forced to marry the dissolute savage murderer of her own father. Yet even this trial seems but to have purified Radegonde's already spotless nature. As for the king—he adored her, and his crimes once committed, his orgies past, always came back to fall at her feet and pray for forgiveness.

And many times did Radegonde forgive him—far more than the required seventy times seven. But at last he wore out even her saintly patience. In all her troubles she had had one consolation—the young brother, who had come with her from Thuringia, and who had been brought up at the court of Clotaire like a prince. In a fit of passion, no doubt moved by jealousy, the king one day fell upon him and killed him.

There is a letter of Radegonde's, written to her cousin, in which she tells of her grief:

“Not a day passes for me without tears for this brother, who has taken all my joy to his tomb. He was so young, the down had only begun to cover his lips, when he was struck; and I, his sister, was not there to help him! Not only have I lost him, but I had not the consolation of closing his dear eyes, nor of bending over him to whisper my last farewell. My burning tears were given no chance

of warming his frozen breast, nor was I able to kiss his dying lips. Why was it not rather I than thou, oh, my brother?"

Feeling thus, can we blame Radegonde that she left Clotaire? It was to Noyon she fled, to old Saint Médard. The ancient story says that the bishop was afraid to receive her into the cloister, dreading the wrath of Clotaire, and that it was Radegonde herself, who, snatching a veil from one of the Sisters, flung her jewels on the altar, crying: "Bishop of the Lord, if you refuse me shelter, if the fear of man is greater to you than the fear of God, remember that the Divine Shepherd will, one day, call you to account for the soul of his sheep."

So she became a nun, and founded a convent in Poitou, where she lived till the day of her death, beloved and cherished even by the very children of Clotaire.

There are many stories told of her—exquisite little human stories which bear upon them the stamp of truth. And there are the usual legends which invariably grow up round a royal saint. At some period she must have killed her dragon, for, until lately, on the day of her festival, a model of the monster was carried in procession through the town, and the girls who wished to know when they would be married, tried to throw stones into its gaping mouth.

She is a wonderful saint, too, for the sick. A friend of mine, travelling by the White Train to Lourdes, was surprised after a stop at Poitiers to find that many of the pilgrims were already cured, after a visit to her tomb. "Oh, yes," said one of the Sisters in charge, "Sainte Radegonde is so *méchante*! She is always stealing cures from the Blessed Virgin."

But if you wish to know what Radegonde is to the

ple of Poitiers, wait till after Mass, and go with me
vn the steps to the crypt, where her body lies beneath
high altar. The old stone coffin is raised on pillars,
l at its foot, is a beautiful statue in marble, showing the
int robed as a nun, yet crowned as a queen. And as we
nd aside among the candles, we shall see the mothers
ning with their little ones, babies' hands guided to touch
sacred foot, lame children held up to kiss her hand,
d little white faces laid confidingly on her bosom,
ich is perhaps the more motherly for all the world,
cause no child of her own ever nestled there.

And it is here, reader, that I shall say *Adieu*, for where
uld I say it better than in the Holy of Holies of this
th century Queen of France.

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